

Author
Yoshinobu Akita



SORCEROUS STABBER

ORPHEN

THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

6. COME TO MY TOWER, SUCCESSOR!

VISIT...

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6. COME TO MY TOWER, SUCCESSOR!





"So I'll just ask you one thing.
Where is the Browning Family's—"
the man started, and at that
moment—

What is going on...?
Orphen couldn't describe how he
felt. He looked down at himself,
but the sudden change
wasn't physiological in nature—





"Milan Tram, doing something so obvious as this... Just what the hell are you thinking?"
the man murmured to himself.

Then he turned his head, as if he realized he wasn't alone. His cold gaze was dyed with curiosity.

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Prologue

“I’m not really going to kill you, you know,” the woman said softly. As she did so, she twisted the man’s wrist with one hand, while her other lifted him by his lapels. She held him in the air as she pushed him up against the wall.

His face stiffened, and as he glared at her face below him, his expression was filled with fear.

The two of them were in what could only be described as a rundown flophouse. Between broken down and busted up walls stood support struts that smelled as if they were actively rotting. The posters that were peeling down from those busted walls were from past theatre productions.

There were no windows. Gas lamps, made in an olden style, were hanging from a cracked and worn ceiling. The middle of the room itself was pure chaos. The man’s associates were lying crumpled here and there, scattered throughout the room.

They were dressed unassumingly, looking like just about any old person anyone pulled off the street. One could go into town and find a hundred men walking the streets that looked just like them. But her? She was different. She wore black battle robes. She was one of only one hundred and seventy people in town that had the right to do so. Though they looked soft, the dim gaslight of the room caused the fabric to give off a more metallic sheen. Her black hair and deep brown eyes seemed to be the same color in the light of the room. And those eyes of hers were pleased, laughing at him as if she’d been playing tricks on him.

“As I said, I’m not interested in killing you. I’m not a murderer, you see,” she repeated to him, laughing gently. “I just want to know what you know.”

“Interfering in our ritual, are you? Just what are you planning, witch?” the man whispered from behind his thick mustache.

She didn’t seem like she particularly cared about what he said, and instead looked around and spoke again. “Hmm. I do feel a bit bad for interrupting your little meeting, but it’s not like you guys feel bad when you do the same thing

during my meetings with my believers, either.”

Where she looked there lay utter chaos, evidence of some big fight with fallen furniture and men alike, a broken altar, and crushed candles that were usually used in sacrificial rites. The candles were ordinary ones, commercially sold in any town or market, but instead of tallow, chicken fat had been used to make them.

She gave out a small, lamenting sigh.

“Well, I mean I’m not a complete monster. I do sympathize with you. The fact that we have dragon cultists in this town now living with us, or something like that... I honestly cannot imagine how stupid they must truly be.”

“You fucking witch...!” The man cursed at her once more with a groan. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t shake her hand on his chest. It made him so very, very angry.

Her face was calm as she murmured to him, “Actually, if we’re all being honest, I get it. I too live my life away from the public eye. And that’s exactly why I sympathize with you. Perhaps that’s a disadvantage on my end. Perhaps I should just be threatening the lives of your little two or three errand boys that I laid out so quickly. Perhaps that would be more expedient...”

After a moment, she spoke again, as if remembering something. “Hm, yes. Perhaps that would be far more expedient indeed...”

“Wa-Wait!” The man screamed, panicking. At this point, even if this was just a threat and not something she was going to carry out, he quickly moved to the bargaining stage of things, even if he knew in his heart of hearts that that wouldn’t work.

She smiled sweetly. “Thank you. Ah... Before making sure I took care of things I wanted to give you my thanks. Because this means you’re going to tell me what you know now, right?”

“Hrrgh...” the man moaned, but he did not correct her.

“Then, once more, I thank you. You certainly measure up to your name as one of The Church of the Gathering on Sacred Ground. So sporting of you to talk with me. Oh, I’m so sorry. Perhaps ‘sporting’ is not a word that should be used

to compliment religious societies such as yourselves.”

“You little...!” the man sputtered in fury.

“I wouldn’t get too excited now, my dear sir. After all, you have so much to tell me!” She paused momentarily before continuing. “I’ve been waiting for you to get proactive about things with me quite patiently, you know,” she finished talking as her eyes narrowed. Not in laughter or merriment, but something far colder than that. Something quiet and deadly.

Her eyes, which up until this moment had been charming, now turned sharp, like blades of ice in her face. Almost hungry. Her expression turned serious, and she opened her mouth to ask another question.

“There’s only one thing I want to know—”

She took a deep breath, and continued.

“Where is the Browning Family’s World?”

Chapter I: It Begins at Night

As if from nothing— In a dream, someone had been beating at his shoulders, waking him. White flecks dimly floated across the deep darkness surrounding him. He stared, half-awake, at their dance. Usually, he'd think that it was ghosts, or something to that degree. But not tonight. The white flecks started to disappear from his field of vision, and Orphen properly awoke.

He dug himself out of the sheets and looked around the room. It was quite wide, and well-supplied. It had certainly cost someone a pretty penny. There was no telling whether or not it was decorated in good taste, though — he never had an eye for things like that. After all, he had no interest in home decorating. However, the owner of this manor did tell him she'd readied this room in the hopes he'd use it.

The pillows heaped on the couch were made of satin. The only really messy thing in the room was a beat-up old duffel bag. All of the worldly possessions he had left were inside of it; an always-too-light wallet, some clothes, and other small sundries. The rest of whatever else was in the room were possessions his sister, the master of this manor, had gathered for him.

Though the master of this manor wasn't truly his sister, at least not in any family registers or official paperwork. He'd always thought of her as his sister, ever since he'd been a child.

The clock on the desk in the room was something she'd given him for his birthday. He thought she'd probably taken it from the Tower of Fangs.

The clock read a little after 2AM, and Orphen scooped up his shirt from where he'd haphazardly thrown it on the eastern-style woven rug below. The shirt was black, clearly worn to its very threads, and he pulled it on over his head.

When he lifted his face, he saw himself reflected in the mirror on the opposing wall. The stern look he had in his eye wasn't something he was doing consciously. His serious face could be considered ironic, considering his circumstances. He had black hair and black eyes, like most others on the continent, really. None of his features had changed since he was born. The only

thing that had changed was the sharp increase in the number of strange events that had started happening to him in the twenty years he'd been alive.

At least, that was how he thought about it.

A leather jacket hung above the bed, and next to it, his beloved bandana and Dragon crest pendant. Hanging on the chain was the crest of a dragon curled around a sword. It was an emblem that represented the absolute peak of black sorcery, The Tower of Fangs.

Orphen quickly put it on. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and slid his feet into his boots while rubbing at his temples.

"For the love of..." He muttered. He shook his head, irritated, and stood.

He toddled sluggishly towards the door.

"Claiomh? You again? Stop this. You do this night after night..." He grumbled, but there was no answer. Orphen answered the door.

No one was there. That was easy to see as he looked around the pitch black hallway. There was only darkness, oozing endlessly wherever he looked.

"Hm? Must've been my imagination..."

And the moment he murmured that, a sharp hiss broke the dark silence around him. Orphen leapt backwards in a quick retreat. A few centimeters in front of his nose, there was a dark figure. He realized a bit belatedly that in its hand was a dagger, and that's where the sharp hiss had come from. It had nicked his nose.

Whether the figure had been sticking to the ceiling and then had decided to drop down and throw the dagger while it did so, or it had just come in from the open door, was something that remained to be seen.

In the meantime, Orphen was calmly watching, assessing the situation as he retreated. The figure was as small as a child and had a mask on its face. It was completely dressed in black, and aside from the dagger, had no other weapons.

Orphen was quite familiar with all of this, the figure, the mask, the dagger. It all came straight out of the Tower of Fangs' playbook.

Is this another black sorcerer that the Tower sent after me to do their dirty

work for them? Or...

Just by taking in the figure's technique, it came to him.

A Stabber! he shouted in his own head. Orphen deflected the figure's fist with his own palm.

The figure came closer.

Orphen squared his shoulders and took another step forward.

After a few more steps, Orphen hurled himself at the figure.

If I can chase him... Then I can win, Orphen thought. But as he thought that, he stopped. If this were any other opponent, they would take the opportunity given to them by his sudden halt to beat and crush him entirely.

But when one is a Stabber, if one were to follow through with that and try to beat the opponent now, one may be taken unawares and meet an unpleasant fate indeed.

Orphen straightened himself up and corrected his fighting stance, then asked his opponent.

"Just what are you trying to pull here? You realize you're in Leticia MacCready's house right? You know, the big shot black sorcerer from the Tower of Fangs?"

"And you're Krylancelo, right?" his opponent replied quietly.

Orphen took a gulp of air and then narrowed his eyes. One could see in his steely gaze and the way he corrected his stance that he was clearly gearing up for a standoff against the figure.

But his opponent continued to speak. At first, Orphen thought that his opponent had been a young boy, just by looking at their physique alone. But their voice was too low, and even if they had been altering their voice on purpose, they would still most definitely be an adult.

"Can't really help the fact that you made me, eh? So I'll just ask you one thing. Where is the Browning Family's—" the man started, and at that moment—
Slaaaam!

Something echoed in the room and the window opened behind them.

From the window, a black figure came jumping into the room.

Another challenger appears?! Orphen thought, and quickly turned to face them. That is to say, he turned to the opponent before him, and shouted.

“I call upon thee, Sisters of Destruction!”

In that instant, a huge shockwave tore itself from the wall of air now protecting Orphen and flew towards his opponents.

There was no real time to confirm whether or not that shockwave had taken out his first opponent. There was only time to turn to the window and anticipate another attack.

The person that came at him from the window tried to hit him with what looked like a portable baton. The new foe looked a lot like the other one; same clothing, same mask, even the same body size. It made Orphen wonder whether or not this new opponent was also possibly a child.

In either case, Orphen managed to dodge another blow from this new attacker that came at him from the side.

The new intruder reacted a bit faster than he expected, kicking at Orphen’s foot. Their technique was pretty good, actually, and in response, Orphen shifted his body backwards with a movement so small it would seem like he was merely shaking his head. He dodged so quickly that the opponent’s trainer-covered foot merely grazed him as he moved.

He quickly and lightly grabbed at the new intruder’s leg, and as if pulling up radishes out of the ground and throwing them into the day’s harvest pile, tossed them away.

“Eeek!” the new intruder shrieked as they fell.

Orphen stared down at them, and heaved a big sigh.

“You know...” he started.

“Not yet!” the intruder screeched from their place on the floor, and threw their baton at Orphen, who dodged it and instead stretched out his palm.

He murmured, "I call upon thee, Tiny Spirits."

With a soft glow, his palm lit up with tiny balls of light, which started to brighten the room as a whole. From the darkness, the features of the opponents started to emerge.

And when Orphen saw who he was dealing with, he groaned loudly.

"Enough, Claiomh. Stop screwing around."

"Grrr...!!" The two opponents growled in voices as if they were choking, shaking their heads.

"I'm not Claiomh, I'm 'Take me to the Tower', The Beloved Masked Cutie: Clai!"

"Uh..." Orphen grunted, squinting at her.

And then he realized what she meant.

"Shit!" he shouted, and looked behind him. The first intruder seemed to have avoided his first round of magic attacks, and was rushing towards the window.

And that's when he saw the open window.

"I release thee, Sword—" He started, but as soon as he started chanting his spell, the first opponent leapt out the window. He hurried to the window and looked around outside of it, all the while on his guard against more surprise attacks— But the first intruder was gone. There was no sign of them at all.

"They managed to run off, huh..." Orphen tutted. Then suddenly, there were two more intruders there in the room with him. This time, they were glaring at him, arms crossed against their chests.

"I really had no clue that there was a second Beloved Masked Cutie running around out there. Wild..."

"Isn't that something you should keep track of?!" Orphen yelled at her, while pulling off her mask. From beneath the slightly-too-large-for-her mask emerged a girl with long, golden hair.

While closing the window firmly, Orphen clearly told her, "No matter how many times you try to bring that back up, my answer isn't gonna change,

Claiomh. No. No, I am not going to bring you to the Tower!”

“Hmmpf,” Claiomh said, stroking her face now that the mask was off of it. She took a deep breath.

“Did you get those battle robes from Tish?” Orphen asked her.

She nodded. “Yeah, I borrowed them. These are her old robes, but they’re still a bit big on me,” Claiomh said lightly, twirling in a circle. If one looked at her, it was obvious she looked identical to the other intruder with those robes. But they were also standard issue battle robes from the Tower.

The robes were soft yet had tensile strength, made of black animal hide and stitched with blade-resistant thread. It didn’t look like it from the outside, but the robes were made with three layers of skins in order to move and flow the way the wearer needed them to. It almost looked like a set of coveralls or a jumpsuit with how easy it was to move in them.

Originally there were several sets of clasps in certain places so weapons, tools, and armor could be clipped to them. But Claiomh’s had obviously been altered by Leticia.

Orphen glanced over at the still-open door, and walked towards it.

“Did you hide all that hair in your robes?”

“Yep. But I couldn’t really move my neck much as a result,” Claiomh said, twisting her neck back and forth as she hefted her long blonde hair out of her robes.

If black hair was common on the continent, blonde hair was too — but for a different reason. Blonde hair meant one was linked to continental nobility. But Claiomh herself wasn’t exactly the definition of noble — she just happened to have some noble lineage, all mixed up together a few generations back.

Orphen closed the door while looking over his shoulder. Then he thought better of it and opened the door again, peering out into the hallway to see what was going on out there. There was nothing left to signify that a (mock) fight had taken place.

He sighed heavily, then closed the door once more.

“Why are you this bad at giving up?”

“Because you should always follow through on what you want to say with action and advocacy,” Claiomh smiled serenely, hands clasped together. She continued, “Okay, but first off, if you trust me with this, then it’ll be easier for you when the Tower bullies you into bringing me to them.”

“Because of you, I completely missed that other intruder. Just where the hell did he go, huh? He can’t be hiding, right? There’s nowhere to do that. That’s what I want to know,” Orphen responded, with a surprised face.

“Oh, you mean Leki? Yeah, he’s already asleep. I didn’t want to wake him up so I did it all myself. I mean, he doesn’t exactly have to eat or anything, but he definitely does need to sleep. So I let him sleep. He’s so weird.”

With that, their conversation came to a screeching halt.

Orphen looked at her, as if concerned for her. Claiomh was facing him, staring at him with her bright blue eyes. Of course, she didn’t exactly look like Leticia, but it was as if Leticia really was her older sister (and one who had loaned her some battle robes). Somehow he was reminded of this when he looked at her.

She’s—, Orphen started to think to himself. *I wonder how long this is going to stick in my craw*, he thought.

He couldn’t exactly answer that question, now, could he?

She put her fist against her chin, as if deep in thought. Her gaze was aimed at the floor, somehow meekly, and as if speaking through a full mouth, she continued.

“I mean, I know you’re really concerned about me, Orphen...”

Orphen immediately shot back, “I’m not worried about you going to the Tower, per se— “

There was a “but” in there that Claiomh could hear that Orphen didn’t say. He didn’t have to say. She continued to speak.

“I’ve noticed lately that whenever you leave, I suddenly get into trouble, and into dangerous situations.”

“Look, if I get into it with the Tower and if things go sideways with them, then

you really can't follow me," he said.

"You can't refute the fact that I've definitely grown up and gotten better at handling myself compared to when we met three months ago."

"Claiomh, you know that civilians aren't allowed entrance into the Tower—"

"But we're partners. I want you to trust in me."

"If things don't go well, you're probably going to become a nuisance to Tish and Forte."

"But—"

"Well, it would be fitting to treat you like that since— "

"Orphen..." She started, clearly angry now. "Do you hate me or something?"

"No, it's not about that—" Orphen insisted, closing his eyes and raising one finger in the air, as if scolding her. He looked as if he were about to make an excuse. Claiomh listened, looking as if she were biting her cheek the whole time.

"That's not the case," he insisted. He let himself be guided by the words he was about to say in his head, and with a troubled expression, continued to speak. "That's not the case, and you know it. It's more like if you do get involved with me as a partner, you'll learn that everything I've gotten mixed up with is only going to get worse. It'll get dangerous for you, and I just can't do that to you. I can't take you with me for a reason like that."

"Excuse me?!"

"—And if you just sit back and relax, whenever I have money I'll buy you something stupid and ridiculous that you'll like—"

"You will?!"

"And anyway, you're selfish and violent and you do all kinds of shit that I just, for the life of me, can't seem to understand. And you'll go on crazy, temperamental rants. If something bad happens, I'll just take care of it with the overwhelming amount of black sorcery firepower that I always have ready. I'll take care of all of the housework, and I'll even eat all the strange things you bring me—"

“You will?”

“Uh...”

“Are you quite finished?” Claiomh asked him, and Orphen nodded.

“Yeah, I think that about covers it,” he said.

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. She wasn’t sure when she’d closed them. But now she opened them, and put her hands on her waist. She said quite decisively, “That’s not all!”

“Whaaat, then?” Orphen unintentionally shouted at her, and tried to grab her.

Bam!

The door slammed open, making them both jump.

“...”

Suddenly, a pretty, but terribly unkempt woman appeared in front of Orphen and Claiomh. She had long black hair, eyes that were still a bit dim with sleep, a firm, fit body, and was so fashionable no picture could ever hope to reliably capture her beauty. She wore a dressing gown over her negligee, and her thin shoulders were pinched and trembling.

She sighed and then groaned loudly.

“Can you please just go the hell to sleep? This is the first time I’ve been able to go unconscious in the last thirty eight hours or so. Please, just shut up and let me sleep...”



“Okay...” Claiomh and Orphen both bowed to her, chastened. They both knew they were thoroughly at fault for this one, and didn’t bother making any excuses.

But in the end, all they could do was leave it to her to get it all cleaned up. No one knew how much she’d slept while she’d been in the hospital for the past two weeks, after all. There was clearly fatigue on her weary face.

Leticia MacCready looked at them both through exhausted eyes. “In the meantime, Forte has given me the all clear... And I don’t think he’ll do anything bad or wrong to you.”

“Sorry,” Orphen mumbled, bowing to her in deference. He looked around her study, and still found it an absolute mess. As if the mass of paperwork and books surrounding them were a primeval forest, about to swallow them whole. Thankfully after all that, Leticia managed to get a few more hours of sleep before getting up and going back into her room.

I guess we’re at the stage of things where it’s okay for me to overwork, Leticia thought to herself, and continued smoothly out loud, “I’ve been going back and forth between here and the Tower now for two full weeks, but as far as I can tell, there’s been no movement on behalf of the elders. I don’t think Forte’s contacted any of them. But then again, he’s the kind of person who won’t talk if he doesn’t see the point of doing so. I really don’t like any of this, but at least I can trust him on this one.”

“I don’t particularly hate it, you know,” Orphen said, chiming in. Whenever they went to the Tower, they had on their robes that signified their status, but as soon as they came home, they both changed into regular clothes. She’d already changed back into the black shirt and beige pants that she wore pretty often, though he wasn’t sure whether they were those same clothes or ones that just looked similar.

But Orphen? Orphen always wore black. Nothing but black.

I wonder if the reason why I choose black even after I’ve taken off my robes is because of the fact that I’m a black sorcerer?

As Orphen thought about it, Leticia frowned.

“It’s probably better that you don’t forgive Forte, you know. He did say he was very disappointed in you, or something close to it.”

“Thought so,” Orphen said with a lazy shrug.

Leticia signed irritably, then without thinking, corrected her own posture, and slowly began to speak.

“That’s not the case, I think. I don’t think he’s really disappointed in you. But I do think he’s suspicious of you at the moment, with everything that’s going on. He probably thinks I’ve become your accomplice in all of this, too. That wouldn’t surprise me in the least.”

“To be fair, he does have some very good reasons to be concerned and doubting me,” Orphen chuckled bitterly, and started enumerating said reasons with his fingers. “Let’s count, shall we? One: the assassination case that just happened. Forte seems to have decided that Krylancelo — that is to say, me — is the killer. The true mastermind behind all of it was me, and there was no corpse or paper trail left behind. After that last battle with the Doll, when the house started to crumble, the city police witnessed you bringing me out of there, Tish. If you managed to detain me, and then trap me in a mansion like this... well, wouldn’t you suspect you too, in that case?”

She probably sharpened her gaze a bit. “You haven’t forgotten that I haven’t forgotten that you never told me the truth about what happened in there, right?”

“I told you that that Krylancelo was a sorcerous apparatus, right? I don’t know whether it was something stored in the Tower that managed to activate by itself or if someone somewhere did that for us, but remember, it was programmed to imitate me, and it did just that. It murdered elders of the Tower looking just like me. And I figure, if you know what I look like, you’re someone I saw quite a bit in the Tower beforehand.”

“I hate how easy to understand your lies are. Have I ever told you that?” Leticia sighed and reached for his hand. She told herself she’d be okay with him not touching her if he had something to say to that in reply. She sighed again, running her fingers through her long hair.

“That’s enough,” she continued, “I’ve had enough of listening to your lies

about all of this. Read this for me instead.”

With that, she presented him with a single sheet of paper, and he took it. He read through it very slowly, almost at a leisurely pace. Leticia read it out loud at nearly the same speed.

“Krylancelo. Twenty years old. Childman student number seven. Studied with Childman. Obtained official qualifications as a senior sorcerer at age fifteen and two months old. Submitted for the record by Leticia MacCready,” she continued, breathing quickly, “And that’s your most recent form on record for the Tower. I updated it ten days ago. While you haven’t lost any of your qualifications as a senior sorcerer, if you complain, they’ll probably try to take it all away from you. I think it’s reasonable to say that if the alliance crumbles, you should still be okay. Nothing should really change. I get it, I do. But if you keep poking your nose into Tower business, you’ll end up having to fight the Tower Assassin.”

“I mean, that seems like it’s already happening, but okay.”

The flippancy of Orphen’s reply caused something to snap within Leticia, her change in expression both sudden and furious.

“What did you do?”

“Not a damn thing, I’ll have you know,” Orphen sighed, holding his hands up in protest. “Remember last night, and how crazy things got? Before Claiomh’s nightly visit, I had another visitor who was dressed just like her.”

“Wait. What do you mean?”

“You’re asking me like I know? I have no idea what the hell happened last night, but whoever came to visit me was armed to the teeth and sure as hell looked a lot like the Tower Assassin.”

“Is... Do you mean the Krylancelo from before? Is he back?” Leticia asked, expression suspicious and wary.

But Orphen shook his head. “Nah, I think this is officially worse than everyone’s favorite doppelganger. Though I may be tooting my own horn a bit too much, if I may say so.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t heard anything,” Leticia said in a stern voice, as he took in a deep, frustrated breath.

“However, it might be really bad,” she continued after a moment. “If this were just a matter of you defeating your doppelganger, and everyone living happily ever after, it would be a lot easier, you know? If the Tower Assassins have started to move, that means that even your crime of going against the alliance may not be forgiven after all, no matter how much time goes by.”

“Huh. That’s odd.”

“It is?”

Orphen came closer to Leticia, who had just raised her face towards him. While he remembered, he continued to speak.

“I don’t know... They didn’t seem like they cared a whole lot about that? It seemed like they were too busy trying to sneak in and find something. Browning said something about that, and I was wondering if you had any idea why they’d try to break in here and search for something.”

“I don’t really have anything of importance hanging around here, actually. At least, nothing that would be of any interest to anyone in the Tower. And even if there was something like that here, it’s not like they would need to use an assassin against me, right? If an elder was there telling me to hand something over, you bet your ass I’d be handing it over as soon as I could.”

It seemed Leticia was still suspicious of what Orphen had been saying. She got a bit closer to him.

“Just do me a favor, this one time, and promise me you won’t go poking your nose into this? The best way to deal with the elders is don’t defy them, don’t get close to them, and keep your eyes sharp when they’re around. That way, they’ll wear themselves out before they get around to doing something about you.”

“I get it, but still...”

“I get it, too. I get that you can’t talk to me about any of this. You’re not the only one who hasn’t exactly been getting a whole lot of sleep, you know,” she said, grimacing. She waved her hand as if to placate him (and also shut him up).

“Try not to hold a grudge,” he muttered.

She continued as if not hearing him at all. “You know, I’ve waited for you to come home for five years, and it wasn’t just so you could make things even worse when you got back. You can use me at your convenience, run me in circles, vent all your frustrations at me, and yet, I’m not allowed to feel angry or jealous. Funny, that.”

“I’m serious, I’m not lying to you,” Orphen insisted, which helped further lower the temperature in the room, as it were. When she turned to him, her words were short and curt.

“Be assured, I will settle this score one day.”

“Uh...” Her words brought to Orphen’s mind an unpleasant premonition. He sighed uneasily.



“The Fall of Jotunheim” —

A black leather book with blank pages.

Though, the heading on the first page certainly was legible.

Majic murmured to himself, even though he’d read this book so many times over now. The tone of his voice was strange, almost airy. As if he weren’t himself.

“Jotunheim, the continent of the giants... Does this mean... the Kingdom of the Gods?”

It might’ve been different had he asked his Master Orphen, or even Leticia. He might’ve been able to learn more about this book had he asked. But he didn’t. He’d stayed silent, saying nothing to no one about it.

Because the book he’d been reading for the past two weeks straight for no particular reason? He’d stolen it from someone else’s house.

Majic sighed. He was a blonde boy not even fifteen years old. Even though he was blonde, he had no ties to any noble family Majic knew of, though it wouldn’t have surprised him to discover one existed. Every day he would wear clothes that looked like pajamas, and lounge in a deck chair out on the terrace.

The black sorcerer-like clothes he'd been wearing previously? He'd stopped wearing them. One of the reasons why was because the city he was in was swarming with black sorcerers (even though no one had asked him about it).

The real reason was a bit more complex than that.

He felt like by wearing those clothes, he was trying to imitate his teacher.

And he knew now how tall an order filling those shoes was.

Well, it might also make things a bit awkward if his teacher asked him to, he added silently.

He turned his face up towards the sun in order to feel its warmth. He shook his head, trying to enjoy the sun's rays washing over him.

But still, what's with this book? The alphabet it's written in and the sentences themselves are so strange...

The language itself was seemingly jumbled, the sentences appeared rhetorical, and every so often there were characters he'd never even seen before covering the page. He couldn't make heads or tails of it, and had wondered briefly if it was some kind of code. But after reading through it repeatedly the last few weeks, he'd decided that wasn't the case.

It was similar to a cypher, but still different, linguistically. But calling it something close to a cypher? Yeah, that seemed about right.

Every so many pages he could make out bits and pieces, and it seemed as if it were a record of war for a local area.

No. No, it's a war chronicle. I'm certain of it.

On top of that, it seemed to be an explanation of the land and its history. It featured words like "migration" and "mutation" and "change", so that's what it had to be. But of the three the one used most often was "mutation".

Of course, most of the book itself really couldn't be read, so the amount of it he'd actually been able to read was small indeed, so words he didn't understand probably appeared far more frequently. But for the time being, that's about how much he was able to read, give or take.

Though the author seems to be wondering whether the fall of the giants was

the catastrophe that happened, or whether a completely different catastrophe had occurred on the continent of the giants... Like they don't seem to be sure what exactly happened, Majic thought to himself as he flipped through the pages of the book.

And it seems like a war happened during that time, between the Dragons, and humans... and gods, too?

He read aloud a piece of the book.

"The Dragons who traveled.

When I look up into the sky, I see that it is filled with a flock, a cursed flock.

They have arrived at the table, an altar, and those speculating upon the scene are no longer gods.

I spoke about it with the three girls who are no longer my little sisters.

Their existence itself alone tells of a seismic shift within the system.

This system I once discovered has since been completely disrupted by this change.

A simple subtraction has shifted everything, changing it decisively.

This world will change. That is a fact.

The problem is that I do not know where it is going from here, what direction, what state of being.

This change will worsen and become more dramatic. No one will be able to run from that as a fact. But now, one question remains: Will it continue to get even worse, forever?

Or will we find a way to avert disaster after all?"

"..."

For a long time, he was only able to read that part alone. It wasn't like this passage had been an apocalyptic prediction for the entire continent — like, the Demon King will come down from the sky and destroy the world or something. No, the thing that really stood out to Majic was the fact that this passage about "a decisive yet devastating change" was not prophetic, at least in tone, but it

appeared to have predicted a disaster anyway.

It seemed that the author of this book chose to record all of this as the catastrophe was occurring.

There was no time to repent, because the worst had already begun. There was no point in begging for help, or salvation. It was already too late.

In other words, this catastrophe, for the most part, had already long since passed into the annals of history.

Or—

“Will it grow even worse, and stay that way forever?”

Majic read that line one more time before closing the book.

The author may still be trapped amidst that chaos and ruin even now, he thought.

At the end of every recorded entry within the book lay the author’s signature. It was a bit hard to make out, but it looked like it read “Swedenborge.”

“Majic, for the love of... just what are you doing up there?”

Majic raised his face and looked to the face that waited for him at the bottom of the terrace. When he got up from the chair to look he could see a familiar blonde-haired girl standing there in the courtyard.

Majic had been borrowing a room in the mansion now with the others for close to two weeks, and it was so big that he just couldn’t get used to it. According to Orphen, if he were to become an elite at the Tower, it would be easy, and moreover, expected that he have a house like this. But if he’d wanted a house like this in Totokanta, he’d have to do everything up to and including robbing the central bank in order to get the cash to finance it.

Forty-three rooms and two separate drawing rooms; one for students, the other for storage. The garden isn’t too large, but the size of the courtyard more than made up for that. It was nearly the size of the school grounds, about half the size of the backyard alone.

Within the courtyard, there was a man-made pond, and the girl stood by its edge. She wore what looked like sportswear, and something that looked like a

black puppy riding around on her head.

The black pseudo-dog was actually a Deep Dragon that had grown attached to her, and now refused to leave. She'd named it Leki, though upon reflection it did occur to her that Leki probably had another name, given to him by his parents. But if he had one, she didn't know what it was. Oh well.

Next to her, a boy with long black hair was stretching. At first glance, Majic had thought it was a girl, then knew better. He also wore something that looked like sportswear, and because of that, the shape of him looked like a thin, black line.

Why the hell are you here right now? While Majic thought that to himself—

"Claiomh!" he called to her, and she replied to him, waving him down.

"Majic, come downstairs. Tiffes said he'd guide you around the city if you go jogging with him."

Tiffes, the boy next to her, waved as well. Majic pretended to be unaware of his waving and ignored him. Instead he put his book down on his chair, and spoke.

"Nah, I'm good. I have work to do for Master anyway, after this."

"Oh, is that right?"



Claiomh made a confused sound. She probably hadn't expected to be turned down. Majic had the good sense to look guilty as she continued to speak.

"Okay, then. We're off for a bit, and we'll be back before noon."

"Okay..."

He stood straight up in the wind for a bit, feeling like he couldn't move. When he opened his eyes once more, he saw that Claiomh and Tiffes were already gone.



"Master!"

When Orphen heard a voice behind him, he turned towards it. When he did, he saw Majic running towards him.

He noticed Majic was carrying the same bound black book that he had been for a few weeks now. He didn't know what the book was called, or what it was about. He got closer and the boy stopped.

Huh? Orphen's face seemed to say, and he asked Majic.

"Where are you going? And why... are you wearing that...?"

He didn't mean Majic's clothing. Instead, he was far more concerned about what Leticia, who was walking along with them, was wearing.

"Oh, this?" Leticia asked, shaking out her clothes a bit. She wore the proof of her station-- robes of a senior sorcerer of the Tower of Fangs. The fabric had a glossy sheen to it, much like her long black hair, and was not designed for combat. Instead, it appeared to be a highly expensive ceremonial outfit. On her collar, she wore a dragon crest pin, the same design as Orphen's pendant, and she, too, wore a similar pendant around her neck.

"Uh..." Majic looked up at her. She was taller than he was. After a moment, he belatedly remembered something. "That reminds me. Master, Claiomh went out. She said she'd be back soon," he added quickly.

"Huh. Alone?"

Majic glanced at Leticia for a moment before answering. "Oh, no, she went

out with Tiffes.”

In Majic’s eyes it seemed like they’d expected that, somehow, but Orphen didn’t seem particularly concerned. As long as there was someone out there with her keeping an eye on her—

“Oh! That little brat. Tiffes!” Leticia groaned, shaking a finger. “I have to bring a report to the Tower today, and he probably thought I was going to push that on him. That’s probably why he ran off!”

“I mean, you probably did push it on him though, right?” Orphen said, squinting at her.

“Sure, but only because that report is on that disappearance that got covered up a few years ago! I had to rewrite it after it got lost in that junk heap of a records department within the Tower. It’s about the final decision on what to do.”

“The final decision?” Orphen asked her. He didn’t seem to quite grasp her meaning there.

“In the past, some dumbass researcher got themselves killed in a lab accident, right? But the elders were afraid to officially acknowledge what happened. Originally this was under the Continental Sorcerer’s Association’s jurisdiction, but since three years have passed, it’s automatically been transferred to us at the Tower. And that’s why I have to release this report.”

“Sounds okay to me.”

“But the most frustrating thing is that I shouldn’t need to submit this, not when I have to do so much other paperwork. Did you know when I’m supposed to submit this, I have to get signatures from everyone else in my department, and that’s as many as twelve people?! On top of that, I don’t even know where to send it! And yet, you’re telling *me* to do this?!”

“Yeah, I am! So just shut the hell up about it, okay?” Orphen shot back at her, shaking off her hands. “Anyway, for the time being, we should go. This job is such a pain in the ass, you’d be better off quitting and getting a cushier job elsewhere!” He continued, yelling louder with momentum without thinking about it.

Clink! As soon as it had started, Leticia was stopped from walking in her tracks. And after a beat, she turned to face him.

“My, we’re awfully carefree about things like this, aren’t we?” As she continued, her face grew pale. “This cushy job has paid for the bed you’re sleeping in, the food you’re eating, and the house you’re living in at the moment. You would do well to remember that.”

“Oh ho?” Orphen said slyly, “And tell me, how did it feel to get away from living in such luxury for a bit when you found me a few weeks ago? Did your little fingers get sore from having to work too hard?” he cooed at her sarcastically.

Leticia’s answering chuckle was creepy, and he could see her temple twitch in rage.

“Awfully cute of you to say, considering you used to come home blubbing after some bully cut off a lizard’s tail and then shoved it up your nose on the daily.”

“Look, incidentally, that kid had been gunning for me since he thought that I’d been the one to cover his older sister’s birthday cake in fish eggs at her party one year. I didn’t do that either, for the record.”

“It’s not my responsibility to make sure other perverts, rebels, and assholes see the light and mend their ways. After all, as a teacher, their small, prejudiced little minds sign my paychecks. I might just swoon thinking about it.”

“Isn’t that exactly what that means, though? If you swoon, you better do it so the back of your skull hits the floor, instead of the front of your face. It’s too pretty to mess up.”

“Ufufufu...”

“Hehehehe...”

“Uh...” Majic spoke up from his place on the sidelines. He was pale and sweating, but bravely continued, “It isn’t good to fight, so maybe don’t do it? Please?”

“...”

“...” Orphen’s reply mirrored Leticia’s, even down to the identical glare they directed towards each other.

With a sigh, they both seemed to relax at the same time.

“Well, I can’t really help wanting to tease you a bit.”

“Yeah, we know. But you know I’m grateful to you for everything you’ve done for me, Tish.”

They pulled away from each other, wearing an identical look of reassurance, and gratitude. They smiled from ear to ear.

“Well then, as the man who has arbitrated our little argument, you have to go and submit the documents, Majic.”

“Thanks, Majic.”

“...You both really are siblings, aren’t you?” Majic finally groaned, giving up.



“Ufufufu...”

They left the manor, three abreast of each other, laughing loudly. Their shoulders shook, as if they were invincible, untouchable by sadness.

“And more the fool I, I suppose. I should give up this castle, leave, and spend the rest of my days wandering.”

In the shade of a pillar, there stood a man with a fur cloak that wasn’t entirely hidden, along with a head of bristly black hair, and a sword scabbard that looked, quite frankly, sad. He put his hand on his chin and stroked it.

“When you return home, you shall be astounded, and also you shall dare to regret that your happiness overshadowed my greatest hardship. And so the wheels of samsara do turn...”

“Brother, no one’s spent a whole lot of time with you since we got here, right? You must be so lonely...”

“...”

The man had absolutely no intent of answering the voice that had spoken from behind his back. Instead, he kept smiling.

The voice behind his back made its return, this time a bit more timidly.

“When you put the spiders in the sorcerer’s room, they didn’t really notice, either.”

“...”

“Would this be considered a slump? We should take a break, a nice long one.”

“Repatriation of prisoners of war is a duty all face at its end, regardless of victory or defeat! Now, go return Nora.”

Without answering the girl’s voice that appeared next to the other voice behind him, Volkan stubbornly stayed quiet, face like stone.

But secretly? Secretly, he sighed.

Chapter II: Greeted in the Morning

The city of Tefurem is one of the most prominent cities on the continent, but few know that. Its prominence is owed to the fact that it's the city of sorcerers, the largest one on the continent.

"That's a bit of extreme logic now, isn't it?" Tiffes added, sitting there on the park bench. "I'm pretty sure the central authority doesn't appreciate this town, and its power, and it probably never will. The Continental Sorcerer's Association doesn't exactly want to admit that the black sorcerers hold the main seat of power at the moment, and that that domain is outside of their own. And I'm saying that because it does exist, not because it's a conspiracy theory, you know?"

"Huh..." Claiomh muttered, looking around with a thousand mile stare. Tefurem as a city has a lot of parks within it, and they sat in one of them. It was thought of as one of the city's main attractions, because of the low population density around the area. There is a lot of land that has been left lightly or uninhabited, mostly because the city had been destroyed and rebuilt three times in its recent history. There was a lot of room to breathe. Few people had been directly involved in the last war, the so-called Sand War.

And the rest? The rest had fled as the city had burnt down for the third time.

The city had been completely rebuilt, so even as they sat in that pretty little park, Claiomh could find no real visible traces of that war. There was absolutely no visual proof that there'd been a war at all — even the trees had been completely replanted to their former amount and density within the main burn areas. Instead, the park was covered in the lushness of cherry trees. And on benches, people sat, enjoying the day.

Leki, who had been in his mistress' arms, looked up at her. Claiomh sighed, and put him back on top of her head, seemingly his favorite place to be.

Tiffes, fixing how his athletic wear fit, continued to speak.

"Originally, people from the eastern part of the continent, as a rule of principle, tend to look down their noses at people from the western part of the

continent. When that sort of rhetoric gets really bad, it still blows me away that there are people out there that think that everyone on the west side of the continent still live in tents and huts out in the middle of the forest. They think that there's no outside world out there past Tefurem's city gates. It's wild."

"I guess so," Claiomh replied half-heartedly as her eyes moved to the most prominent building in the city. It was somewhat far from where they were, but it was still a tower of chalk, and it loomed over the city. "Is that the World-Seeing Tower?"

The tower looked slender, of an ivory material, but it was sturdy. Come rain, wind, or shine, it was still standing after all of these years.

"That's it," Tiffes said, standing up from his place on the bench. "The Tower is the biggest building in the city, aside from the central library. If you buy a tourist guide for the city, it'll tell you the same thing. Legend has it that long ago, the Nornir built this for black sorcerers, which were their children. I'm not sure if that's true or not."

He continued, "When the Kimluck Church proposed the Guardian Law to protect Fenrir's Forest, the World-Seeing Tower was also included in that law, to make sure nothing would happen to it. As a result, the World-Seeing Tower is completely off-limits. Forty years ago, the highest-ranking elders of the Tower of Fangs completely outlawed any kind of study of the World-Seeing Tower. Around the same time, the Sand War broke out. Personally, I think the timing is no coincidence."

Tiffes drew closer to her, long hair waving in the wind, and pointed towards the World-Seeing Tower. "You can see the exterior from here. It was carved from scratch. There are no windows, or even air holes. There is one entrance, which doubles as an exit. And now that entrance has continued to be blocked by the Executive Council of the Tower of Fangs so no one can go inside. Black sorcerers have it surveilled at all hours of the day."

"The World-Seeing Tower is a strange name, isn't it? I wonder why they named it that," Claiomh murmured to herself, looking where Tiffes had pointed.

Tiffes looked up at the empty sky and spoke in a moment of recollection.

"Oh, that? That's because the Nornir, the Weird Dragons built it. At least,

that's what they said. *Have you doubts of the World, look thee well upon this tower.* Or something to that effect. I think it was Sister Isterviva who told me that, if memory serves."

"What about you?"

"Huh?" Claiomh repeated to Tiffes, who hadn't understood what she meant.

"After all, the Dragons said to *look thee well upon this tower*, and it was made for black sorcerers and everything."

"Uh... Uh huh."

"But the people of the Church were saying not to look at the tower, and as a result, no one's really looked inside, right? That's what I got from your little lesson. It's not selfish to want to look if you're trying to see something that no one else has seen. Don't you want to study that tower and find out what makes it tick?"

Tiffes frowned deeply, obviously troubled by the thought. "You don't get it. The Nornir actually started a *war* to make sure that wouldn't happen. That one black sorcerer? The last one who tried to study the tower and go inside of it? They had to start a war to destroy him and make sure he couldn't go in there. That's the reason why ancient Tefurem was destroyed, or at least, one out of three reasons."

"Ancient Tefurem?"

"Okay, so now we're going into the city's history, but Tefurem was originally named Tefurem City, wayyy back in the past. Then, the first leveling of the city happened, destroyed by the Nornir, and they rebuilt. Everything up until the Sand War had been the doing of Tefurem City, including the rebuilds. But after the Sand War, everything you see around you was rebuilt, and it just became Tefurem."

"Well, whatever. Those Nornir bastards were pretty selfish, right?" Claiomh murmured, taking Leki from off the top of her head and into her arms.

Whenever she hugged the little pseudo-dog, it was always able to stabilize its own weight so it could cling to her shoulders. Leki lifted his nose and sniffed, wagging his tail. Then she looked at Tiffes, and as if remembering something,

spoke once more.

“What’s the Executive Council?” she asked.

Hearing that, Tiffes seemed to be slightly shocked. It wasn’t like he’d thought she knew about it, but still. Eyes wide open, the student spoke eloquently. Claiomh looked back at him, and when he saw her puzzled expression, he began to slowly answer her question.

“It’s a governing body within the Tower that’s made up of the most powerful elders. They make most of the important situations within the Tower, but they also take care of general affairs and certain types of office work as well. However, when it comes to classes and curriculum, only the Executive Council can touch any of that. And conversely, only the Executive Council can decide punishment if they feel a class has gotten out of line. Private battles and duels between classes are considered treason. Otherwise, the Executive Council says that infighting would happen on a daily basis.”

“Classes...” Claiomh said, tilting her head to look up at the sky. “Was that the class with Orphen?”

“Childman’s classes, yeah. My teacher was in the same class with him, so...”

“So classes are beneath the Executive Council...” She muttered to herself. “I wonder if there was anything that happened with Orphen?”

“That’s not funny! You don’t get it! Childman’s classes? They were exceptional. Top of the top. They were who everyone wanted to be!” Suddenly Tiffes found himself shouting at her. Claiomh retreated, but he got closer to her.

“Look. Childman Powderfield was said to be the most powerful, most influential teacher the Tower had. His influence was beyond even the Executive Council. He had power that reached far, far beyond your average teacher, and things started to fall apart after his disappearance.. The Tower has become toxic, and therefore, it’s becoming dangerous as an organization. Can you understand how much the Tower had been suppressing its ambition because of him? I’m not sure you understand how serious this all is.”

“You’re right. I don’t get it. I don’t get it at all,” she admitted.

He sighed. “Okay. Let’s start from the beginning, shall we?” Tiffes said

patiently, and continued with a finger pointing up, “Let’s talk about the Tower as an organization, shall we? Remember, the Tower isn’t just a school, but an organization, closer to a society of sorts. It’s independent in every way you can think of, from as an agency to having an intelligence information network to maintaining its own finances to even its own commercialization. It’s its own whole, functional society. That’s the Tower of Fangs, the society of black sorcerers. That’s it.”

Claiomh nodded silently, saying nothing. Tiffes lowered his chin as he continued.

“The Executive Council has the authority to guide and direct all of the decisions that the organization makes as a whole. Only the best and brightest black sorcerers make that Council, and they have all the powers. And the classes? They have no power at all.”

He then backed away a bit, gave her some space, and put his finger down. He closed his eyes and continued to speak.

“You see, classes are usually composed of two things: teachers, and students. Makes sense so far, right? But this time, with the Tower of Fangs, there’s one more element in play — that of one’s obligation to execute the will of the Executive Council to the fullest degree.”

“Obligation?”

“That’s right. In return, you’re getting the best black sorcery education money can buy. Even I have to follow that rule. If I get an order from the Council, I have to follow it. No exceptions.”

“Have they ever given you one?”

“Mostly it’s been boring stuff like sweeping up fallen leaves and unclogging pipes and drains. Grunt work, you know?”

The didactic tone previously used in most of his prior explanations seemed to suddenly vanish as Tiffes responded to her question. He launched his fist in the air as he smiled and said, “But really? My dream is to become a teacher as prolific as Childman was.”

“You think you can do that?”

“I... Well, it’s just a dream.”

Claiomh had snuck up behind him before he realized it and now was laughing at him.

“But say you become a really strong sorcerer. Then what will you do?”

“Hm...”

As if shy, Tiffes answered her with a red hot blush on his cheeks. “I’d become one of the Thirteen Apostles. That’s the ultimate goal of most black sorcerers out there, anyway.”

“Really? I’m not sure I would want to do that,” she said, putting her chin on her fist.

Tiffes looked shocked, jaw hanging open.

“Krylanc —I mean, Orphen used to ignore the ideas that the elders set out before him. As I said before, the capital of the continent is in the east. That says everything, doesn’t it?”

“If you become one of the Apostles, you’d travel to the capital city, right? Would you bring Pat with you?”

Somehow it half felt like quibbling on Claiomh’s part. Tiffes listened to her, then leaned over her to where it seemed like he was looming over her. In a tone that was low, almost muttering, he said, “My sister is my sister, and I’m me. A black sorcerer must be independent.”

“In order to be independent, that doesn’t mean you have to be separated from her. Well, whatever.”

She shrugged her shoulders and turned around, then turned her gaze to the World-Seeing Tower.

“Let’s go to the World-Seeing Tower next, shall we? It’s nearby and I’ve always wanted to see it. Tish and Orphen have been too busy to take me.”

“Okay, but...”

After getting an affirmative, Claiomh jumped up, excited, and then started to jog out of the park.

I don't like the way sorcerers think... She thought to herself, not satisfied at all with his answer. *He's just too praiseworthy with his goals. Seems a bit fake.*

Claiomh was stuck in her own head as she ran, her thoughts overflowing as her sportswear got wet with sweat. While kicking and pushing up and off the earth as she ran, she was deep in her thoughts.

And it's not just Tiffes here. It's Orphen too. It's that whole black magician attitude of "if you can't do it yourself and on your own, you must be incompetent". But that's not the case in real life. In real life, one must depend on others. It's how we function as a society, and how we grow as people.

Claiomh knew better, but it didn't really matter. She was in no mood to complain, or start something with someone because of her opinions on this.

She'd noticed how Orphen more or less had stopped talking to her in the last few days.

This is so weird. It's like he's deliberately avoiding me.

To Leki, it was all the same. He rode on top of her head, in a great mood, stretching his front leg for some reason and stroking his nose without a whole lot of meaning to it. He bounced along on top of her head, and to him, all was well. Probably.

But Claiomh was still consumed by her thoughts.

Majic has been a little weird lately, too. The last time I had dinner with him and Tish, he'd just been nibbling on his food. And the food had been fine! It felt like he'd been saying goodbye, so that nothing would come bite him in the ass in the future. And I don't know how I know this, but this is what it felt like...

And — Suddenly, she stopped. Tiffes finally caught up with her, and looked at her.

"What's wrong? We're not at the World-Seeing Tower yet."

He wanted to ask if she'd sprained her ankle or something. But he waited for her reply, as Claiomh squeezed her hands into fists.

"Did you—" He started to ask, raising his voice to the empty sky.

"Oh no. Oh no no no. Don't tell me. Don't tell me you and Tish have

concocted some kind of wacky scheme where you want me to be in charge of those two nitwits to keep them out of your hair. Have you?”

Claiomh wasn't aware of how keen her sense of intuition typically was. This time, however, she was off the mark.



In the western part of Tefurem, the rocky, jagged mountains smoothed out, sloping gently down towards a lower elevation. The region was only a few hours walk from the city, and less than two hours by carriage. There, surrounded by forest and the hills, lay a fortress built of ochre bricks.

Because one must climb the mountain to get there, it wasn't visible from the city. If one looked at it, the first thing one would see is the three meter high wall surrounding the structure. The lone entrance, doubling as an exit, was a gate made of steel. Entrance required proof of second-class or higher citizenship, no criminal record, and donations above a particular amount made to certain parties.

In other words, celebrities only.

If one became a sorcerer, one would be able to speak with the guards at the checkpoint. If one became a senior sorcerer, one could make arrangements to visit via wagon and be met promptly by a messenger from the fortress.

“Well, I'm not sure if that's really true, but then again, I've never waited in front of the checkpoint gates.”

Orphen watched as Leticia had a good laugh over her own words. The three of them were traveling in a carriage, which they'd borrowed from the Continental Sorcerers' Association, clop clopping their way down the road. The carriage, which was six heads high, wasn't bad for riding per se, but the shaking still made for a rough ride. Unlike the one they'd taken to Tafurem, this one didn't have a roof, so they could see the white hair of the older man driving it. The breeze was soft as it blew through the trees, and the sky shone like a clear stream of water.

The carriage's destination? None other than the apex of learning for any black sorcerer on the continent: the Tower of Fangs.

“Uh...”

Majic timidly asked, looking up from that strange black book his eyes had been continually glued to throughout their journey and the last few weeks.

“Um...” he tried again, his blonde hair fluttering. “What are the qualifications of a senior sorcerer?”

“I guess, to put it simply, it means you’ve reached the top of the food chain as far as the Tower is concerned,” Orphen said. He crossed his arms across his chest, thought for a moment, and continued, “If you’re older than fifteen, and you’re the top student of the year, you will be recognized as a senior sorcerer. Though it should be said that there are always exceptions.”

“It’s kind of an honorary title,” Leticia said, settling back against her carriage seat. “I was recognized as a senior sorcerer at eighteen. Krylanc—” she caught herself and stopped halfway before shrugging and continuing, “Orphen was earlier than me. You were only fifteen, right?”

“Really?” Majic asked. Orphen grinned.

“So you never did believe what I told you before, eh?”

“Isn’t it already too late? For me to take the top of the class, I mean.”

“There were seven other students in Childman’s classes along with me. Five of them were qualified as senior sorcerers. We kind of had a monopoly on things, so we had Heartia, who entered the same year I did, and Comicron, who was a year above us both, though he was never recognized as top of the class. He always got second place, instead. It’s a yearly competition of sorts, and luck usually ends up playing a larger role than skill, in the end.”

“For you, your main competitor was Heartia, like Corgon was for Comicron,” Orphen said, his expression almost teasing her. As if ready to bite his pointing figure, Leticia turned to him.

“To be fair, Tish, you were coming for Forte’s neck and that’s what kept him a step ahead of you most of the time. I felt so bad for him. Think of it that way.”

“What are you talking about? I always expected to settle for second place, because my year had a genius in it.”

“Uhhh...” Majic tried again, looking at the two of them as they argued. He pinched his mouth in a frown. When they looked around, he looked confused. “Um, who is who?”

Somehow, with all these new names suddenly coming one after the other, Majic had gotten mightily confused. He was struggling to keep up.

“Oh, it’s all good. Everyone we’re talking about was in Childman’s classes. In a way, they’re like brothers and sisters of mine,” Orphen said.

“That’s because you were the youngest kid in class,” Leticia said from behind him, tapping his forehead. Orphen kept his eyes closed.

“I’m the same age as the rest of you, the same age as when Heartia started to work in Totokanta at the Alliance. The sorcerer’s arm of the Alliance would usually be equal or better than me in terms of ability, but it’s somehow better than me, period. I’m not sure if it was because I was poor at trickery or what, but Comicron and Corgon held the first-and second-place seats together, and they were a year ahead of us.”

“And now neither of them are in the Tower. They were pretty powerful sorcerers, too...” Leticia muttered, as if putting a period on Orphen’s words. Majic seemed like he wanted to learn a bit more, but Orphen decided to speak instead.

“So including you, Tish, the senior group numbered at three. The class president was Forte Puckingham. He wasn’t the head of the class, but he did become the TA. At that point, I was already certified as a senior sorcerer, and as for Tish, it’s speculation as to whether she could’ve become class president or not. There was a rumor surrounding her at the time, so...”

“So it was *your* fault that didn’t happen. It was because of a rumor...”

“Anyway, the person with the best grades in that year was—”

“Someone’s already died, remember? Azalie. My sister.”

“...”

Orphen stiffened at the words that had leaked bitterly from Leticia’s mouth. It felt as if someone had stabbed him in the gut, like someone had their hands

around his neck.

He managed to shove aside the sudden feeling and continue speaking.

“Yep. Azalie. They called her the Chaos Witch, and she was top of the class in sorcery. And against Forte...”

He swallowed the sour spit that had collected on his tongue without a sound and continued.

“She was more like our teacher’s private agent, a sleeper cell of one on her own. She knew behavioral patterns and general knowledge so, so much more thoroughly than everyone else. She was a senior sorcerer, too.”

“A white sorcerer?” Majic asked, surprised. Orphen nodded.

“Historically speaking, no one has ever been capable of wielding both black and white sorcery simultaneously. And on top of that, there’s never been a white sorcerer that’s escaped the Alliance’s notice, either. Currently, all of the white sorcerers are incarcerated at Misty Falls. Azalie had been hiding behind the facade of being a black sorcerer, and eluded the Alliance’s information network.”

“But she was a white sorcerer...” Majic mumbled, as if chewing on his words. Orphen continued to speak.

“That’s right. White sorcery manipulates concepts like time and the heart. It stands in stark contrast to black sorcery which deals with power and matter. It should be said, though, that the number of white sorcerers out there in comparison to black sorcerers is... pretty small, all things considered. The Continental Sorcerers’ Alliance has a chokehold on the reins of power within the continent today with the Apostles and white sorcerers as well. Well... to put it more correctly, I don’t think she was a black sorcerer capable of using white sorcery, but rather a white sorcerer capable of using black sorcery.”

“And the teacher?”

“Me? I sure as hell can’t use white sorcery. Flattered you think I can, though,” Orphen said.

“That’s not what I mean,” Majic said. He stroked the black cover of the book

on his lap. “I don’t mean you, Master. I’ve listened to your story, and it seems like you’ve done everything! But I wanted to know about your teacher. Childman.”

“...” Orphen went silent, seemingly lost in thought.

Then he spoke.

“No matter how monstrous my teacher was, he definitely couldn’t handle white sorcery. Let me use an example. If black sorcery is used to throw a stone far away, white sorcery couldn’t be used to retrieve it. One could make a jewel out of nothing with white sorcery. But it couldn’t be used to counter black sorcery. That’s not the way it works.”

“So... Childman wasn’t such a big deal then, was he?” Majic said, eyebrows knitting together, trying to figure it out.

Orphen sighed, a hand against his temple. He had the feeling Leticia was gaping at him, furious. But he continued to speak.

“As I’ve said more than once, mana quality is an inherited trait. The type of magic someone can use is not a measure of skill. White sorcery, and for that matter perhaps sorcery in general, is just a tool to be used. What’s important is *how* you use it.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Anyway, to get back to the original conversation topic, your question was about Childman and Azalie. Given the nature of sorcery and mana, only Azalie could have surpassed Childman. Get it?”

He could hear Leticia letting out a long-suffering sigh, muttering to herself.

“And we lost her talent because of something stupid.”

“I don’t disagree,” Orphen said, looking ahead of them. There was a huge building coming up quickly in front of them, soaring above the treetops.

That’s right. We lost her. And it kills me to think about it, Orphen thought to himself gloomily.

But his thoughts implied something different from what Leticia had meant. The sad thing was, the foolishness that had cost them Azalie was far worse than

Leticia realized— As he thought to himself, he gazed at the apex of continental black sorcery, the Tower of Fangs, as they drew nearer to it.

“...?”

Orphen froze as he felt something, sensed it in the air around them.

The carriage proceeded on its path, unaware, the sound of the wheels rumbling against the earth they struck.

“Tish...” He said, and she turned around at the mention of her name.

“Hm?”

“Do you remember anyone having a grudge against you? For any reason?” he asked bluntly.

“I’m an upstanding citizen, I’ll have you know. Unlike you.”

“So... hypothetically speaking, if we were to get ambushed, it would be my fault, wouldn’t it?”

“Hypothetically speaking? Yes. Yes it would.”

...

The conversation stopped.

After a long moment, both Leticia and Majic spoke.

“AMBUSH?!” They both yelled at the same time.

Countless stones came flying towards their wagon from every direction.

There probably was no noise generated by those stones. At the same time, it appeared that there were sunspots in the sky. They arced in a parabola, and then all of them fell, flying towards the carriage and everyone in it.

“I spin thee thus, Halo Armor!” Orphen shouted, raising his hands up as he chanted the spell.

Objects resembling chains knitted themselves together in the sky, becoming a net, which became a wall. This was a defensive move so strong mere stones wouldn’t be able to penetrate it.

Or so he thought.

In reality, all of the stones just bounced off of the net of light, scattering in all different directions. However, there was one stone whose silhouette was larger, and more conspicuous than the others.

Orphen saw this from the corner of his eye, and he was puzzled.

Is that a bottle...?

As soon as it hit the net, it shattered with a horrifically loud sound.

And then, liquid spilled out of it.

The colorless liquid didn't fall directly down, but instead, spread itself over the net of light. And though the net was akin to a forcefield, allowing the stones to bounce off harmlessly, the liquid was a chemical of some sort, making an explosive sound.

It sizzled, like roasting flesh, and something resembling smoke billowed forth.

"Whoaaa ahhhh!" Majic shouted, surprised. The cloud of gas burned the inside of his nostrils.

Orphen screamed his next spell, covering his nose with his left sleeve.

"I exhale thee, Angel Breath!"

He shook his right arm as he cast the spell. The strong gust of wind generated by the spell helped push the poisonous miasma away from their party.

But because one can't do defense and offense at the same time, the net of light disappeared.

"What the hell was that?!" Screamed the white-haired man, their driver. He hightailed it out of there as fast as he could.

"Wait!," Orphen yelled. "Don't park the carriage right th—"

"Krylancelo, wait!" Leticia yelled, and Orphen was a mite frustrated with her calling his old name, the name he'd sworn off and buried so long ago. She caught him with her arm.

Then she looked at the driver, and tried to go after him.

That's when she realized it.

“I’m surrounded!”

“What?!”

In Childman’s classes, two students were trained in battle tactics— that is to say, Leticia and Orphen. Orphen was trained in “stabbing”, assassination technique and tactics. Leticia learned how to fight defensively, trained extensively in surviving such attacks.

As a result, it doesn’t matter how many enemies she had, or what her position was, or how intense her assailant’s desire to kill, once she took measure of it and communicated it to Orphen, he understood that she spoke from a well of experience and intuition. While it was hard to convince him that she was, indeed, surrounded, if she said so, it had to be true.

And just as she had predicted, the driver, who’d been trying so hard to escape across the road and into the woods beyond, suddenly fell to the ground with a meaty thud and a loud groan.

From out of the woods slunk a figure in a white hood. He straddled the fallen driver.

“A Dragon cultist?!” Orphen said, sucking in a deep breath—

But the man in white passed him silently without answering. He held an iron club in his hand, the kind that beat righteous men to pulp. Orphen looked around and saw similarly white-hooded men starting to creep out of the forest, towards the carriage, encircling them on all sides.

Hilariously enough, apart from the white hoods, the other men wore everyday clothing. If they were to take off their hoods, they wouldn’t have stood out at all on the street. They all held different weapons in their hands. One had a knife, another had a club. Some held scissors, and some held sickles. But every one of them was armed.

The white hoods were a mark of the Dragon cultists, a sect of fanatical believers in Dragons, that mostly inhabited Tafurem.

It said a lot about Tefurem as a city, that a cult bearing fanatical hatred towards black sorcerers was (mostly) allowed to live in peace as long as they hid their faces behind white hoods.



“M-Master...?” Majic asked nervously, face scared.

Orphen was back-to-back with Leticia by the carriage. The number of cultists that had showed up were roughly twenty in number. If it was only that many, Orphen thought, then they would be able to handle them with a little sorcery with no problem.

However, he was rather loathe to kill everyone using sorcery.

Shit— Orphen stared at the man who’d appeared first in exasperation.

Envelopment. We’re definitely surrounded, and they have people on top of the carriage as well. All of them have weapons, and if those weapons are poisoned, we’re fucked.

Even if he fought with his bare hands, the most he could take on at one time was perhaps four or five people at most. Keeping that in mind, Orphen turned to Leticia, who was behind him.

“How many people can you take on at once?”

Leticia answered him honestly.

“Bare-handed? Probably two at most.”

“We don’t have any weapons?”

“I think there’s maybe one sword for self-defense near the driver’s seat of the carriage.”

“Roger that” Orphen murmured, and opened his up-until-then clenched fist. “I’ll jump out at them, Tish, you back me up. Got it?”

“Master, what about me?” Majic asked. Without turning around, Orphen replied, “Stay out of this. Lie low. Don’t try anything.”

Majic was silent, but Orphen knew that the younger man had taken what he’d said to heart. And besides, there was no time to be distracted. The walls were closing in on them as more cultists joined the crowd encircling them.

If they get any closer, we’re gonna be crushed— At that moment, Orphen jumped from the main part of the carriage to the driver’s seat. The cultists murmured amongst themselves.

He found the sword near the seat, and pulled it out from the corner of his line of sight. It was a bit weighty and kind of impractical, but he removed it from its sheath, which he left by the driver's seat. Sword hanging from one hand, he leapt down without pause.

As soon as his feet hit the ground, an elderly cultist (who still had a youthful build) approached him, waving a single-edged saw.

"...!"

Orphen saw him coming. He took a small breath, pulled the sword inwards towards his body, and met the saw that was coming at him. With a short, soft clang, he managed to push the saw back with his blade.

Then the sword slid from Orphen's hand and fell to the ground.

The next few moments were a blur, as if Orphen's eyeballs were shaking in their sockets...

And the moment after that, Orphen still wasn't sure.

Maybe he closed his eyes.

Maybe he didn't.

In his lungs, the air he'd just inhaled collided painfully with the breath he was trying to exhale, but it got stuck midway. It was as if his lungs had been reprogrammed, breathing with a different rhythm than what it had been used to seconds before.

Surprised by the sound of his own feet hitting the ground, Orphen came back to himself, and to his senses. Startled by another loud sound, he managed to shake himself out of that moment of dissociation.

Looking down, there was the man with the saw — the source of the sound. The man's knee was obviously shattered, and he wailed in pain. The mouth of his white hood had shifted during the fight, and now it appeared as if that white maw were drooling, exhaling screams instead of breaths — ...What?

Orphen's eyes glanced left, then right, his head staying stock still.

But he'd only gotten one of them down. The next attack came from both sides simultaneously.

He'd already seen them coming.

This time, there was no confusion. Only ruthless clarity.

This time, time stopped again. But along with it, his thinking did too, instead trusting in his muscles and their years of trained reflexes.

A long industrial hammer came at him from the right, and from the left, a sickle. Orphen tried to jump out of the way, but no movement occurred. His body was no longer listening to him.

Only the barest hint of a retreat from his head as he managed to dodge the hammer, which seemed to fracture the sky itself as it flew upward. The sickle couldn't be moved at all, seemingly.

Orphen didn't wait for the fallen hammer to rise again.

Instead, he stopped breathing and trusted his body to step towards the owner of that hammer.

At the same time, his fist came rushing out and away from his body.

The man's body seemed to bend from the impact of Orphen's punch. As the cultist fell, it looked like he was fainting.

Then, Orphen turned around and released the back of his fist into the owner of the sickle. The back of his hand slammed into the man's nose, breaking it cleanly.

Without missing a beat, he stepped into the path of another enemy. It flustered him a bit, but he managed to keep his cool, embedding his elbow into the new target's body.

With a light, meaty thud, the man slid to the ground.

Orphen momentarily calmed down.

What is going on...?

Orphen couldn't describe how he felt. He looked down at himself, but the sudden change wasn't physiological in nature — His heart's palpitations were intense for a bit, but they settled. His heart quieted, his mind quieted, and his body temperature went down.

My mind... my heart... everything is so clear, and so sharp — With a sigh, he looked up and over towards the carriage.

The horses were agitated, not because of the attack, but because of the fact that their driver was no longer there. Leticia, as if forgetting the role she was taking, moved to support Orphen.

Majic looked largely unaffected, the same as usual.

Ordinarily, Orphen might've laughed.

But this time, he just silently picked up the sword.

And then he took the remaining ten cultists down alone.

"Wow, what a mess..."

Orphen listened to Leticia mutter as he approached the first of the cultists lying on the ground. This had been the one with the lead pipe. Orphen counted twenty three men, hoods rent from their heads. The air was filled with the cries of the injured. In the driver's seat, Majic held the body of the one who had passed out.

None of the cultists were restrained, because there was no rope with which to do so. Orphen was confident in his assessment that they wouldn't be able to move for quite some time.

Leticia mumbled to herself.

"What the hell, you didn't even need backup. If you knew you weren't going to need backup, I would've preferred you didn't get me involved."

But he hadn't thought he'd be able to do it — Orphen tried to say that, but then the man with the iron pipe opened his eyes.

"Urrgh..." He struggled, his chest obviously hurting. Orphen grabbed his shoulder.

"And now, time for the best part... Interrogation."

"I-It hurts..."

The man raised his arms and tried to resist, but stiffened as if he'd been hit with an electric shock.

Orphen spoke to the man in a long-suffering sigh.

“I wouldn’t move around a whole lot if I were you. I think some of your insides got hit hard by my attacks. Don’t breathe too deeply, either.”

“Our scriptures warned us about you... Spellcaster!”

Because his hood had been rent thoroughly in the fight, part of it covered the man’s face, so Orphen couldn’t see his expression. It was as white as the man’s furious eyes.

As if the whole situation were more an annoyance than anything, he looked to Leticia. When he saw her shrug, he turned back to the man again.

Contrary to how the man was struggling, he seemed forced to take Orphen’s advice. He was unable to move, and if he struggled any more, all he’d accomplish was further injury.

In the end, he just glowered at Orphen, his eyes watering as sweat dripped into them from his brow.

Since the man seemed disinclined to talk, Orphen decided to speak first.

“Why’d you attack us?”

The man’s eyes appeared to change color, darkening with rage, as Orphen spoke. It seemed that Orphen was just waiting for him to speak.

Finally, the man replied to him, a cruel certainty behind his words.

“We will take our revenge... upon your friends!”

“Your revenge?” Orphen asked, frowning deeply. “I don’t remember pissing off any of you Dragon cultists, but maybe I missed something.”

The man immediately spat back his reply.

“Your very presence violates every law, every precept we hold sacred on the continent! So we’ll wipe all of you away like the insects you are!”

“Ah, so it was some good ol’ fashioned indiscriminate terrorism because of your religion, then?” Leticia interjected, her mouth looking pinched. She approached the man from behind and continued, “You know, if you keep doing things like this, you won’t be able to stop. So I would watch your mouth, if I

were you.”

“You fucking *witch!*” the man practically vomited his retort, his body heaving. He pushed a trembling fist towards the sky and screamed, “Your lot have been slaughtering us for a long time, our comrades are gone because of you!”

“The Demonic Sword of Puanuk!”

“ —?! ”

Orphen looked for the source of the sudden voice, and then turned around. The voice had come from the direction of the carriage, as he looked back — In front of his eyes, the source of the sound sped past him. When Orphen tried to trace its origin, looking past the road, but he saw nothing, absolutely nothing. A chill breeze blew past, and the white hood he’d been previously interrogating had shockingly vanished.

As had the head it usually rested upon.

“Who —?! ”

Orphen looked around frantically trying to find the source of the attack. The sonic blast had likely blown the cultist’s head clean from his shoulders. And that blast hadn’t come from any side they searched, but rather, most likely, from above.

“Masterrrrr!”

Orphen could hear Majic’s amazed shouting, and looked over to find him pointing towards the forest.

“What are you...” Orphen started to mutter.

“Krylancelo, even though they didn’t want us to see their faces, they did come to our door and tried to pick us off. Seemed like they knew us well, right?”

The man who had recovered from fainting was smiling now, looking down at them all from his place near the driver’s seat of the carriage.

“That’s what we call the *hydrant* . Remember?” the man asked Orphen, his smile growing almost grotesquely wide.

“I do,” Orphen replied, and turned his gaze towards the headless body of the

fallen cultist. Perhaps he was entranced by it. With a sigh, he remembered that Majic was still screaming.

“M-Masterrrrr!”

Why does that kid's scream always start with my name? Orphen wondered, and turned to his student.

Majic pointed at the headless corpse, “Uhh, Master, why doesn't he have a head? He's dead, isn't he?!”

“You've never seen a corpse, have you?” Orphen asked him gloomily. Majic pointed with his finger and stiffly said, “NO! I haven't!”

“Have you ever seen someone die?”

“I — Well, yes, I have,” Majic answered, voice becoming small.

“Death is actually pretty boring, when you think about it. Because you always leave behind something like this, a body. Even if you're murdered.”

He raised his arms naturally as he spoke, and turned towards the so-called “hydrant” that was above the tree behind him.

Then Orphen shouted, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

At that moment, a huge amount of light was emitted by his raised and swinging hand. As if slashing vertically, he brought down his hand, and as a result, wave of searing light cleaved vertically, from sky to earth.

The hydrant tree was struck squarely, and the scorching heat left it completely dessicated.

The hot air got pushed up in the sky, as did the dust that came with it, then got pushed back down again from all of the cold air in the atmosphere towards the ground.

The heat wave finally stopped, but only after completely incinerating a part of the forest. The earth seemed to tremble in the wake of the blast.

“...”

Orphen was silent as he retracted his arm. The limb was slightly singed, the stench of burnt hair reaching everyone's noses.

“Surely what I did wasn’t enough to anger you so much that you lost control of your spell,” a voice said from where the dried out hydrant was.

Orphen turned.

Behind him was a man who looked around twenty years old, about the same age as Orphen. His features were young and strangely beautiful, but only on one side of his face. But the left side of his face was not ugly.

There was nothing there. He had no left side of his face at all.

Instead, there was a huge, maiming scar. His eyelids and cheek had been carved off, as had his left ear. There was no hair on that side of his head, and instead there was a deep, deep scar that ran from the top of his temple to the bottom of his chin.

His left eye wasn’t visible, if it was there at all.

The man wore Tower robes, much like Leticia did. In his left hand, he held a mask that had been hiding his face. “That was an incredible amount of heat. I was nearly killed, you know,” the man said, glancing for a moment at Leticia.

“Right, Tish? I mean, I still have half of my face intact. I’d really prefer to keep it that way, you know?”

“Whatever did I do to warrant the honor of having Hydrant, from the Executive Council, welcome me personally? My popularity must be on the rise,” Leticia said from the side. Her expression was sarcastic, her words guarded and suspicious.

Hydrant gave a small nod. Around him, approximately twenty of the cultists rolled around on the ground in agony, groaning.

“But of course you are. The Tower welcomes you and your party.”

As soon as the word “welcomes” was out of his mouth, they found themselves riding on the wind towards the Tower.

While he wasn’t actively watching it, the Tower of Fangs filled Orphen’s field of vision in all of its grandeur.

The Tower welcomed them.

Chapter III: Still No Break at High Noon In reality, the Tower of Fangs was not a tower at all.

It resembled the shape of a fortress more than anything else. And that isn't merely a casual observation. It was surrounded by a high bulwark with only one entrance, just like the tower itself. The windows were small and mostly on the higher floors, and the buildings around the structure were all nine-story high rises built of unyielding stone.

Within the outer wall, four smaller towers stood at each of its corners. If necessary, they could wait for a large army without scrambling for defense. Further in was another tower, reminiscent of a model fortress.

This tower, which initially looked both rugged and hostile, had a corridor so cluttered that it was difficult to call it an "entrance" at all. Each floor shared a similar layout, full of dozens of rooms.

The first floor was chiefly rooms that belonged to the Executive Council, mostly reception and office rooms. If your business with the Tower was simple, this was the only floor you'd need access to.

Of course, the actual Executive Council member offices were on the top floor, but thanks to a streak of poor communication, people mistakenly thought otherwise. It was a bit of a nuisance, to say the least.

The second floor consisted mostly of storage rooms, and was used mostly as a buffer between the first floor and the sounds of activity in the upper levels. The third floor was the gymnasium. And the other six floors were filled with things like classrooms and laboratories.

The student dorms were located in a separate building outside of the site, connected to the entrance gates and the public cemetery.

At high noon, they found themselves in a room on the fourth floor.

"You could call this a break room," Leticia murmured as they sat around a table. On every floor, the room nearest to the stairs was a break room. Occasionally, like at the present time, it served as a makeshift waiting room.

“You hate this room, right Tish?”

“Yup. I really, really hate it.”

“Why?” Majic asked her. From the side, she made a strange face, her mouth open.

She looked at him and casually replied, “Why do you think? Could *you* relax here?” She gestured to the rest of the room roughly.

A wooden chaise longue, a table with a large stain on it, equipped with a coffee maker that may be useful if you manage to get some hot water and add it to the machine. An obnoxiously loud clock hung from the wall, its hands turning endlessly.

The room was utterly devoid of windows.

Yeah, but that's normal for the Tower, Orphen thought to himself, as he looked around the room she was gesturing towards.

But it seemed like Majic still didn't understand.

“But Master seems to be having fun. Right?” He asked, as he shook a hand towards Orphen.

After seeing Leticia's suspicious gaze directed at him, Orphen replied, “I... You think so?”

“Yeah,” Majic replied simply. Leticia was standing by the table and silently looking up at his face.

“...”

Without answering them, Orphen stared up at the ceiling. Its bare, simple wood, invited his gaze, yet it gave him a decidedly ominous feeling. There was nothing particularly remarkable about it. Still, Orphen found his eyes drawn to it, much as they would be to a starry sky.

Without thinking, Orphen had gone silent, and he couldn't think of what to do next for the life of him. Then — Suddenly, the door opened with a soft sound. In the doorway stood a young man, and everyone turned to look in his direction.

After getting a good look at him, everyone immediately relaxed. The young man was just an apprentice sorcerer. He didn't even have the proper Tower robes yet. Still, his clothes had the same design, being all black, except for his high-necked white undershirt. He wore a ring on his right ring finger, a cheap thing that looked like it had been around since the beginning of time itself. But there was something strange about it.

His age was about the same as Orphen's, and his high-necked undershirt was pinned the same way it would be as if it were a collar. The pin was not the crest of the Tower, but instead, it was the crest of a private secretary.

When he spoke, it was with a voice that was surprisingly soft, or perhaps a bit sleepy.

"It seems you are ready to see Assistant Forte. However..."

He had a small smile on his lips as he looked at Leticia and Majic, and it was as if he was allowing them to see that smile.

"However," the young man continued, "Miss Leticia and her young man will need to wait for a bit."

"Abrupt" is a good word to describe Forte Puckingham.

At least, Orphen thinks so. Whatever he does is abrupt.

And now he would see that abrupt man for the first time in five years.

"That man just now? He was a spy."

It took her a few moments to fully digest Orphen's words as she watched his face. She put her long black hair behind one shoulder casually. The way she wore her hair was a violation of the dress code for the Tower. Her gaze was calm, though, as she took in the man whose lips were tightly pursed.

He wore the black robes of a professor, the same robes that Childman used to wear. It was proof he'd been in Childman's classes.

The classroom Childman used to teach in was, up until a few years ago, used as the dedicated waiting room for teachers. It was familiar. But it seemed that Forte had made a few changes when he'd taken over the room a few years ago.

Or perhaps Orphen's memory wasn't as good as it used to be, he wasn't sure.

“...”

After a long moment, Orphen finally figured it out.

“That guy... he’s the secretary now?”

“That’s correct,” Forte said, as he settled into a chair. After a moment he raised his face to Orphen’s and continued, “Vimbi Stottahl. Not a fake name, of course. He was hired because he never enrolled in classes at the Tower. I don’t care much about that, but it seems he was in contact with Wall Kahlen when I was hanging around him.”

“Wall Kahlen...” Orphen said, rolling the name around in his mouth.

A smile spilled from Forte’s lips as he replied, “Yes. I’m Wall Kahlen of the Wall Kahlen classes now. I’m sure you haven’t forgotten that.”

There’s no way I could forget that, Orphen thought bitterly, his eyes heavily lidded as he stared at Forte. Something in him replied to that thought and left off Forte’s new title.

That’s right. What Tish said was true. Forte, you’re really going to be a teacher here at the Tower, huh...

Forte picked up the thread of conversation that had been flowing through Orphen’s head.

“I just have my eye on him is all. He’s a sorcerer that’s pretty powerful, after all. I would be remiss in my duties if I didn’t keep an eye on him. He’s powerful to the point of being able to Stab, I think.”

With that, he glanced at Orphen, their eyes meeting for a moment before Orphen looked away.

“My, aren’t we calm.”

“Mm?” With a mere raising of one eyebrow, Forte answered him with a question of his own.

Orphen took a deep breath before looking at him and rephrasing his sentence.

“Even with that other guy working from the shadows within Wall’s class... I

wouldn't have forgotten about Wall's class. Because it's the only class for assassins in the Tower. I don't think you would've forgotten I was in those classes. Remember? I was there until I was ten years old!"

Forte replied to him with a cool, almost blank expression. Orphen got closer to him and spoke again.

"Whatever you do... Don't take your eyes off of Wall Kahlen. Don't do it."

"And that's exactly why he's first on my list to get rid of," Forte replied back smoothly without a pause. "I assume you've met Hydrant already, correct?"

"...!"

Orphen froze in place.

And that's when he remembered.



“Be sure to think on all of this. Slowly and thoroughly,” Forte had said to him in the past. “So that means that rat bastard was waiting for me to be assigned somewhere within the Tower while I was enrolled in the Wall classes, wasn’t it?”

Forte nodded silently, eyes heavily lidded.

Orphen continued, “Last night Tish and I had a late night visitor. Seemed to be someone from the Tower assassins. Makes sense they would be involved with the Wall classes.”

Forte nodded again, remaining expressionless. “It seems some of those from the Wall classes have finally begun to move.”

“Only so they achieve their goal and end you, Forte,” Orphen replied sarcastically.

But —

“That’s most likely not the case,” Forte said, shrugging and then stretching his shoulders. He sighed. He fixed his posture, and spread his hands out on the desk. He continued in a murmur, “Actually, it seems that they’ve been taking some rather strange actions as of late. Like deciding to get involved with the Dragon cultists.”

“The cultists? Really?”

“Last week here in Tefurem, there was an incident where about a dozen people were slaughtered in a house in the suburbs.”

“Again?” Orphen groaned, and Forte chuckled.

“Well, yes. However, contrary to the previous event with the Other Krylancelo, these thugs just broke down the door, broke all of the tools in the house, and left the corpses in quite a state. That is to say, they didn’t simply finish them with a single blow. The cause of death was neither stabbing nor poison, but blunt force trauma.

“That’s a rather messy way to kill people, wouldn’t you say?” Reflexively, Orphen found himself imagining the scene. “I mean, I was in the hospital so I would have to agree, it probably wasn’t the Other Krylancelo, as you call him. I

don't think Claiomh's guy was talking about these sorts of rumors, either."

"That's right. Have you noticed anything?"

"A few things, but I haven't really talked about them," Orphen all but spat out in reply. Forte's reply was cautious, suspicious.

"Why?"

"Because you've been secretly keeping score. I know you. And if you feel you've mistakenly deducted points on your end, you'll feel bad about it."

"Just like you, it seems," Forte laughed.

"Well, whatever. There are quite a number of strange things about this case. For example, the house where the bodies were found was a secretly renovated house that had been abandoned years ago. The victims gathered there. But the strangest thing is this: all nineteen of them seemingly killed each other, beating each other to death. Scientifically speaking, you need at least the same amount of effort, both mentally and physically, to do that. Especially with that many criminals kicking down the door and forcing their way inside. And not one of them has been caught yet? What a joke," Orphen said.

He continued, "So the takeaway from this is that we have an assassin pretending to be a common murderer? An amateur?"

"That's probably the truth of it. This is a bit embarrassing to say, but my intuition told me about how the Wall classes stank, as it were. Rotten to the core. And when the class secretary was revealed to be Vimbi Stottahl... well, then. Imagine my surprise."

After ruminating about Vimbi's hard-to-say name for a bit, Orphen replied to Forte.

"A little bit ago, the guys from the Wall classes were talking about how cultists were meddling in their business, or something to that effect."

"Interesting, considering you have nineteen men that are dead. Nineteen men who used to hang about an abandoned house, who, by the looks of their belongings, were cultists themselves."

"Huh. Is that right?"

“Is what right?” Forte asked him, but Orphen could tell by the look on his face that Forte already knew what he was going to say.

Taking note, Orphen said, “On our way here we were attacked by cultists. I think your guess is correct, because the one guy we captured kept railing on about how sorcerers were killing his friends. Then Hydrant poked his head out and did his thing while he’d been monitoring the situation...” He trailed off.

Forte’s expression changed minutely, and Orphen could see a small bit of sympathy in his eyes.

“Forte?” He asked, gently prompting the other man.

As Forte spoke, he gave a small, tired sigh. He removed a piece of paper from his desk drawer. “To be honest, the reason why I called Tish here is because I felt you were the best one to handle this.”

Forte handed him the piece of paper. Or rather, it was a copy of a document. It was as if Orphen’s eyes were caressing the ink that had yet to even dry.

Then it slipped through his fingers and onto the floor.

Forte’s face was calculatedly serious. “I wonder,” he said, “had these documents not come into my hands, which they tried to stop. If that wasn’t the case, most likely, those in charge of Wall’s classes wouldn’t have kept me alive this long, in all probability. Well, I don’t want to die like *that* if we’re being honest with each other here.”

It was as if Orphen had never heard such words from him before. His ears started to tingle in pain, humming with it. He stared at the floor, where the document copies lay.

Most likely, Hydrant was the one who had created these copies. Because of course it was.

He always did things like that.

“I don’t want to show Tish any of these documents. After all, I was only able to infiltrate those classes thanks to her.”

Bam!

As Orphen stamped his foot on the floor, he found himself leaving the

classroom. He just didn't give a shit anymore. He didn't care if it was a small army of assassins coming after him. He was done!

Forte was still in the now-empty classroom that Orphen had just stormed out of, and a bit belatedly, he found himself murmuring, "But was it the same for you?"

Orphen did not respond. He left the room, ran down the hall, and towards the room where Wall's classes usually took place. It was burned into his memory, after all. He'd spent so much time there as a child. It would've been strange had he managed to forget it.

The document had been signed with Hydrant's real name - Milan Tram. Its contents were simple. It was a report, containing details of the small uproar that had just happened.

The raid on a street near the Tower by the cultists —

Victims are senior sorcerer Leticia MacCready and her accompanying party —

The twenty three assaulters were Dragon cultists who hid their faces —

It was a part of Hydrant's testimony.

I hereby testify under oath that senior sorcerer Leticia MacCready was under personal attack and the actions taken to cease that attack were legitimately necessary for preservation of life under —

Legitimately necessary.

The report stated that all twenty three cultists died after the battle.

Bam! Orphen kept running, kicking the door in with all the momentum he could muster and —

He jumped into the classroom, the soles of his feet brushing the floor.

The door closed behind him.

It was as if Wall's classes had never taken place in that room at all. There was no one in this room.

"Fuuuuuck."

If one thinks about it, classrooms are rarely used unless there are lectures

happening within them.

Has this become a gym room instead?

It seemed that the room had become a place where one trained to do surgery in the field. Orphen, having made this observation, felt his feet return to the floor.

“...?!”

Something was wrong.

Something was very wrong.

Orphen found himself turning around. It wasn't that he was able to identify exactly what was wrong, just that chills were racing up and down his spine for no real reason he could pinpoint, and he was shuddering in dread.

Something was wrong.

The empty classroom was dark, even though it was before noon. The desks were dirty, the chairs scattered around the room. There were many thumbtack marks on the bulletin board, as well as bent legs and at a bit of a tilt. Nothing was affixed to it.

There was dust on the window frame.

Something was wrong.

And beside the window stood an old man.

When did he come in...? Orphen asked himself, finding himself struggling. Up until a moment ago, no one had been there.

Was his confusion that apparent on his face?

The old man answered him with a laugh.

“I was just in your blind spot is all, young man.”

The old man's voice was soft, his words curt. Even though he was old, he seemed taller than Orphen, and though he didn't seem to have much weight on him at all, he seemed to be perfectly healthy. He wore a jet black set of robes that had silver lines on them.

Orphen knew who he was. He knew the man's name.

"Professor Kahlen..."

"Ah, so you remember me after all, young Krylancelo," Wall said, glancing at the doorway for a moment before continuing, "I heard you were back in town. I'm glad you remember me, but I would love to know why you just came charging into my classroom all of a sudden."

"I'm looking for Hydrant," Orphen said, looking into his eyes briefly. As expected, the old man wasn't particularly moved by his words.

Instead Wall just laughed again and said, "Milan is no longer a student of my classes, you know."

"You're the strongest assassin in the Tower, aren't you?" Orphen had finally run out of excuses, and now knew what he wanted to say. "Your classes have trained many in the art of assassination. Hydrant is probably the best student you've educated thus far."

Wall listened with a sarcastic smile, like a crack running through asphalt.

"Just like you, the strongest assassin to come out of Childman's classes," Wall volleyed in return. "Truly, the strongest in the Tower has to be you, right?"

"I don't say things I don't mean. This is me telling you to take some fucking responsibility," Orphen snapped in a shout, waving his arms. "This is about you. Though you probably have as many copies of those documents that you want to submit to the Executive Council as the day has hours, right?"

"If you want access to them, you should be able to read the ones I submitted yesterday. But only those."

"I'm talking about right now! Right! Now!"

"I have to say, I'm a bit confused here, son. I'm not sure what I did to make you angry enough to approach me in this way," Wall said, shrugging. "Though I'm sure it has something to do with those Dragon cultists."

"In the report, it said all of the cultists were dead —" Orphen managed to squeeze out, barely restraining himself. "I didn't kill *anyone*. After we left, Hydrant decided to kill the lot of them, even though they could hardly move

anyway!”

“That’s right, corpse retrieval was carried out by my students. I have to say, I was quite surprised to see the Executive Council calling me to wipe out some irrelevant little insects on their behalf, though,” the old man said, narrowing his eyes. Because of that, the smile that had been peacefully floating on his lips up until that moment completely disappeared.

He continued, “It seems that Milan was properly penalized, though I think his sentence was reduced in the end, wasn’t it? Ah, well, I don’t think we can blame him too much. After all, as a small child, he snapped and killed his parents. He had been radicalized, you see. A fanatic.”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it,” Orphen said suspiciously, staring at the old man. His expression was cool now, not bothered in the least.

Then he looked away from the old man and around the classroom instead.

There was no real meaning to it.

Just as suddenly as Wall had appeared, Orphen knew that his other assassin students were lurking somewhere in the room. They just weren’t immediately visible, was all.

As if chasing Orphen’s line of sight, Wall’s murmur followed it.

“Anyway, Krylancelo, is there any need to get so angry? After all, think about it. *You* and your party were the victims of that brazen attack by the Dragon cultists.”

“...I spoke to one of them. He said that sorcerers were killing their friends, right before Hydrant took him out.”

As he answered, Orphen returned his gaze to Wall’s face.

“Last week, Forte told me about the cultists who were murdered. And you were his prime suspect, I’ll have you know.”

“Are you sure you’re allowed to talk about this with me?” Orphen asked him. “What you need to know is that Forte is also aware of the fact that his hands aren’t exactly clean when it comes to this. In a few days’ time, Forte’s new secretary will die in front of this classroom. Because he can do that, he’s

capable of that. But I don't really give a shit about that, truth be told. I don't know anything about it, and it allows me to resist the administration all I like," he finished, spitting his words at the old man.

"I don't particularly care about what your plans are for the cultists. I only care about one thing."

Orphen was on a roll now. He swung an accusatory finger in the old man's direction as he spoke, "Someone snuck into Tish's house, and they were definitely an assassin. And I'm pretty sure all of the Tower's assassins are still breathing. Just try and touch her with one finger and see what happens. Do it and I'll show you what it feels like to be targeted by assassins. Or have you really forgotten who I am?"

Having said his piece, Orphen turned his back on Wall.

The old man spoke from behind him lightly.

"I won't say that I don't understand this situation, but I also won't play dumb with you on this one. You did show your hand. You have revealed that you don't understand what's really going on."

As he walked to the door, Orphen ignored him firmly. But Wall continued speaking regardless.

"As to who's the strongest? I'm not going to make any self-aggrandizing statements here, but remember that it wasn't Hydrant against you that day with the cultists. At the time I couldn't help but think that I shouldn't have handed you over to Childman. At all."

Orphen opened the door. There were no people in the hallway, no steps echoed against the linoleum floor in the left or right passages.

Wall's final words to him were a threat.

"But if possible, I would dissuade you from turning me into your enemy. Childman is no longer in the Tower, after all."

The door closed behind Orphen.

After entering the hallway, he felt a sudden wave of fatigue. He held his cheek in his right hand and sighed gloomily.

Needless to say, by that time, Orphen had already turned Wall and his students into his enemies.



Slowly running up the road, which had turned into a gentle slope upward —

The number of buildings decreased in this part of the city. There were not a whole lot of vacant lots, or dense little mini forests in sight. The manor was far from here, but its lot looked quite large.

Claiomh dimly remembered Orphen telling her about how many senior sorcerers in the Tower had their houses here in this neighborhood. Even now she had the same questions deep in her chest that she had when he'd originally told her that.

She slowed her pace, jogging slowly, taking care not to accidentally trample Leki, who was following her.

Leticia's manor house was at the top of the hill, and Claiomh wondered in that moment if Leticia's house was bigger than her own. She looked up at it as she approached.

Tiffes seemed to be lagging a bit behind Claiomh and Leki. While he was behind a bit, he more or less had kept pace with them the whole time.

Then his pace increased until he was side by side with Claiomh. He kicked Leki as he caught up, and spoke to Claiomh.

"Um —"

"?" Claiomh responded to him with a question in her eyes. Tiffes wasn't very good at jogging and talking at the same time, but that seemed to be the norm with many black sorcerers, when one took into account that spells required verbal components more often than not. Being able to concentrate on both at the same time was difficult, and that's exactly why many sorcerers had to train hard to do both at the same time.

Tiffes had gotten better at it, though, and this time, he spoke without difficulty.

"There was something I was thinking about. Is it okay if I ask you something?"

“Of course. What’s on your mind?”

So I’ve been freeloading off of Tish for two weeks now, and I haven’t spoken to anyone else but her and Orphen... Tiffes thought, his bad habit of hiding behind his bangs when he was nervous coming to the forefront.

“Claiomh, you’re a sorcerer, right?”

“Y-yeah, uh, kinda?”

Tiffes had the feeling she knew what he was going to ask, and so he nodded before continuing,

“How did that happen?”

Claiomh tried to play off of that. As if Tiffes had seen that coming, he opened his mouth. It was as if she could predict every word he was going to say. And finally —

—she asked exactly what he thought she might.

“I’ve been wondering exactly how I ended up here, hanging out with you and Orphen.”

Oh, for the love of...

Claiomh held her head and sighed. She blew out a breath and slowed her pace. Tiffes noticed she slowed down immediately, but she didn’t notice, herself. Leki got ahead of her, and ran around here and there, shaking his little head. He lost his balance, and ended up doing a small somersault in front of her feet.

“Um...?” Tiffes started, face skeptical.

Without listening, Claiomh immediately answered him.

“Orphen never asked me that.”

Her tone was a bit rough, the smallest bit of hostility gilding the edges of her words. It surprised Tiffes quite a bit.

However, Claiomh wasn’t angry. She was aware of the reality of her situation and relationship with Orphen, for better or for worse. That was all.

And she was a bit surprised by the depth of her own feelings.

She slowed her pace once more, and continued to speak.

“I was thinking about it a little bit ago before it hit me — the only people who live around here are sorcerers, right?”

“Well, yeah. The Continental Sorcerers’ Association bought this area up a little while ago, but the area has belonged to the Tower for a long time.”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that. But I do know that there are places where the only people there are sorcerers, so everyone realizes that and they treat each other accordingly. And we seem to be in one of those places, by the line of your questioning, it seems.”

“Huh...”

“You probably don’t even understand what I’m talking about, right?” Claiomh cut him off, staring at him. Tiffes, feeling quite uncomfortably seen, gave a forced laugh.

She chose her words carefully. It wasn’t a very convincing show she was putting on. In reality she was speaking as she thought.

“The Sorcerer’s Alliance in Totokanta, where I grew up... well, only sorcerers are allowed to join, and enter their property. Each time my friends and I wanted to take a peep inside of their property, there was always a lookout posted. And even in the Tower, I know that Orphen can’t bring me inside of it. Just now at the World-Seeing Tower, they even had a lookout there, so I couldn’t enter. But it wasn’t like they were saying that it was for sorcerers only, because that was a pre-established fact. At least, not explicitly. And I understand why. If they were to make it explicitly known that it was for sorcerers only, it still wouldn’t help sorcerers do things like investigate those areas if they needed to.”

“Well, I guess that sorta thing happens...” Tiffes said, his tone indicating that he was less than satisfied with what she was saying, and that it wasn’t that simple.

Claiomh continued to ignore him and continued to speak.

“So in the end, yes, there are places where only sorcerers are allowed. Tish’s place is not one of them — I’m the only real non-sorcerer there.”

She shrugged.

“So it’s probably not good for me to be there.”

“I uh, well, maybe so...”

Claiomh stopped moving, and listened to him. She took a breath, and rubbed her knees with both hands.

“I’m tired because I spoke while running,” she explained.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” he said.

Claiomh waved him off. “It’s okay. It was just some jogging. And you can walk, that’s fine with me —”

“Uhhh...”

Leki hadn’t realized they’d stopped moving, and came running over. Looking at his little back, Tiffes started to speak. He seemed troubled.

“That wasn’t exactly what I wanted to hear you talk about. I thought that it’s a little rare to see someone like you going on a journey when you have debt and loans to repay. I’m a little curious, is all.”

“Hm?” This time it was Claiomh who had the suspicious face, putting her hand on her mouth and groaning.

“I don’t think people normally do that...”

“...”

At that point, Leki had finally realized that his humans had stopped, and he jumped around like crazy.

“Um, well, Orphen didn’t seem particularly bothered by it, and you said you would be Orphen’s student, Tiffes, so... It seemed more interesting than life at home for me, and neither my mom nor my sister could stop me... Um...”

They reversed their steps, getting a bit confused before managing to get back onto the main road that would get them back to the manor house.

While holding Leki in her arms and watching his arms flap as she walked, Claiomh was trying to find the words to continue speaking.

She finally did, and said, “I’m okay because I took a proper sabbatical from the school I was going to downtown. I also already got my graduation test all squared away. But it’s not like I was particularly torn between going and not going, you see...”

And then she suddenly stopped talking. Tiffes, who was walking a bit ahead of her stopped.

“What’s wrong?”

Listening closely, Tiffes then pointed to the gate in shock.

“What is...”

He groaned, dumbfounded, still pointing to the gate. Claiomh looked where he was pointing. It was the front gate of Leticia’s house, made of iron. It was still brand new, firmly constructed, but now it had chains locking the front of it. Not only that, it seemed that there was a board clamped to the chains, and behind the board is an old desk, followed by a sofa that seems quite heavy —

“Is this... a barricade?” Claiomh asked. She made a judgment quite quickly. Leki squirmed in her arms, looking up towards the roof of the manor house. Claiomh felt something, and allowed her line of sight to follow where Leki was looking.

And when she did, she saw that there was a figure on the roof.

That figure started to wave them down.

“Ahahahaha!”

“Oh. It’s Volkan.”

“That’s riiiiight! Here’s Volkan!”

He had his usual unkempt bristly black hair and his usual shabby fur cloak on as he answered them loudly.

His index finger stabbed the air as he pointed it at the heavens above. “You’ll never be able to forget my war cry! My voice penetrates down to even the simplest man’s heart!” He continued to speak as he lowered his finger.

“Only frogs don’t know of me. Every person knows of the Bulldog of

Masmaturia, Vulcano Volkan! In accordance with the will of heaven, I shall smite all of the ignorant and saute them with salad dressing!”

By the end of his little spiel, Volkan was pointing at Tiffes and Claiomh.

Claiomh was at the point of trying to remove the barricade.

“Hey, Tiffes, could you support the board from your side?”

“Huh. This seems pretty easy to remove.”

“Heeyyyyyy!” Volkan shouted in a loud tone at them.

“Wait a second! I just finished building that fort, why are you trying to take it away?! Ahhh nooo don’t touch that, it took forever to get that sofa over there like that!”

“Shut the hell up! So noisy, goodness.” Claiomh put Leki back on top of her head, and then pointed a finger at Volkan in a stabbing motion. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but I’m pretty tired from jogging so just leave us alone!”

“What a poor loser you are, little girl,” Volkan shouted at her, letting his cloak flutter open in the wind. As if he were just acting in a play. “It’s a warrior’s duty to keep their bodies fit and ready for any action that may come their way! You are an immature child if you don’t understand that, young maiden!”

But Claiomh ignored him, and spoke instead.

“I don’t even understand what you’re saying! If you’re just messing around, you should do it in a fashion that doesn’t cause so much trouble for others.”

“Who’s playing arrrrroooound?! Not meee!” Volkan roared from the roof, shaking his fist at her in rage.

“Hey, wait a second. Calm down and listen to me —”

“Don’t listen to him. Tiffes, is there a way to remove this chain?”

“Yeah, I’d say so... Seeing as it’s just wrapped around the gate.”

“Hey, wait a second! Oh. That’s right. Wait! Hey! If you try to forcefully remove the barricade you’ll set off a trap I’ve built into it! Yeah! Yep! That’s it!”

“They never think of anyone else but themselves, do they, when they pull stunts like this? Oh, get this desk, could you?”

“It’s pretty heavy.”

“That’s it! I can no longer guarantee that your hostage will still be alive when you get to them! And your hostage is me at this point! I’m worried about old age and I’ve destroyed my intestinal tract! So I’m telling you, don’t you dare move that desk!”

“Shut the hell up! Gosh, you’re so noisy! Seriously!”

As she yelled at Volkan, Tiffes went ahead and did as she directed, pushing the desk away from the gate.

Claiomh finally shouted at Volkan some more.

“Will you please shut up?! I swear, the noise from your yelling will make this house evaporate. So noisy!”

Tiffes looked at her timidly. Volkan seemed to be just as shy from his place on the roof.

Then —

“Ahahaha! Stop me if you can, little girl!”

“I can’t tell if he’s strong or weak as hell...” Claiomh muttered as she opened and went in through the gate.

Leticia’s home itself is actually quite small compared to the courtyard and backyard, not including the front yard, which wasn’t entirely visible from the house itself. The windows were patterned glass and hard to see through. Therefore it was a bit of a strange structure, with the front of it facing north.

Anyway, when Claiomh got into the vestibule, she allowed Leki to hop down to her feet.

From the top of the roof, Volkan continued to persistently scream.

“How dare they! Such brazen little invaders coming into my fort like this!”

Claiomh shouted back at him through the vestibule.

“Excuse me?! Just *who’s* brazen here?!” She screamed, crouching with her fists on her lap. “And what’s this about a fort?!”

“Up until a moment ago, this place was mine! I’m occupying this house so it’s

mine, you shitty child!”

“Just what are you babbling on about?” She shot back at him.

“What am I babbling on about? This place is mine now because I’ve been occupying it. If you keep at this, my special forces units will not stay silent! They’ll take their due!”

“Spe —”

Tiffes started to mutter to himself, his eyes darting left and right anxiously. He dreaded what events might happen next...

For now, Claiomh picked up one end of the chain that had just been undone, and cast her eyes downward.

Then...

“Target confirmed.”

Claiomh didn’t miss the whisper that the air carried to her ears from up ahead.

There, in one of the flower beds, hid a little girl. She looked to be about ten years old with her black hair plaited into two braids.

Clang.

The old, rusted chains rattled in Claiomh’s hands as she held them.

“Target confirmed. Capture mission a success. Pat will begin her next directive.”

With that, she spread a crumpled piece of paper, a flyer, between her hands, and flattened it out.

“Directive confirmed. I repeat, directive confirmed. Um... The bargain sale sofa... Oh, no, that’s not it, that’s right, the order was written on the back. Oh, here we go. Well, a ‘bold surprise attack. It isn’t conspicuous, it won’t stand out, and you won’t notice it. You are hereby ordered to dispose of the target. Destroy immediately after reading’.”

The girl decided to bury her orders somewhere deep within the flowerbed, and took a deep breath of relief.

“Disposal complete. Pat is ready to take action,” she muttered, then looked up at them, raising her face.

Claiomh still held the chain in her hands and looked down at Pat.

“...”

For a little while, they stared at each other. A few seconds, perhaps.

And then Pat smiled unexpectedly.

“Field Operative Pat to Field Command Ops. Surprise attack failed. Goodbye.”

Her words fell flat around them.

“You know what...?” Claiomh started with heavy lidded eyes.

“Don’t speak to the dead,” Pat replied to her, somewhat teasingly.

“Well, whatever...” Claiomh sighed and looked over at Tiffes, who just smiled at her.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “She’ll get tired of this game soon enough. And then she’ll mysteriously come back from the ‘dead’. Don’t worry.”

“Got it.” Claiomh held her head and moved away from Pat. “Anyway, next is...” She started, but then the sound of a window opening from above got her attention.

The dwarf with glasses poked his head out of the window. And for some reason, there was a black cat, Nora, draped around his shoulders.

A voice boomed from above them.

“Now, Dortin!” Volkan declared. At some point he’d pulled out his old, battered sword and was swinging it around in the air above them, as if to cheer his brother on. “The first strike has nearly broken the enemy’s morale! Go finish them off!”

“Doesn’t really look that way to me, but okay...” Dortin muttered to himself, and ignored his brother.

But Volkan didn’t take the hint. Instead, he continued, “If we finish them off here, and knock them out, we can lure them to death while they’re in dreamland, sleeping like little babies!”

“Just what well of energy do you pull such bizarre enthusiasm from...?”

“Now! Go then, young Dortin! Our mother gave birth to you for this day!”

“...”

No longer grumbling under his breath, Dortin finally sighed.

Volkan lifted the bucket that sat at his feet.

A clear liquid splashed over Tiffes’ head, who had been looking above at the scene before him.

“Aaaaah!” Tiffes screamed, and fell without even slipping on the fluid that had been heaped upon him. He rolled back and forth, flapping his arms on the ground.

“Hot water?!” Claiomh, who had been watching, had receded into the background, but now she gasped.

“Oh! The little mob princess gets it!” Volkan roared in triumph, even though he had done nothing but scream.

“Who’re you calling a little mob princess?” Claiomh shot back at him from below.

Volkan ignored her and continued. “We’re going to have a corpse to clean, and we don’t want to damage the goods, you know? We should boil it before it goes deep underground.”

“Hhhh...” Tiffes came to, half-crying, his face red because of the hot water.

“You good?” Claiomh asked him.

While listening to her, Tiffes saw Leki and suddenly felt relief fill him. It was as if Leki was a child who had to be evacuated from a disaster (the hot water) and had made it to safety unharmed.

Meanwhile, on the roof, Volkan was still hooting and hollering without cease.

“Hahaha! There are no blindspots to my conspiracies! Yes sir! That’s genius for you, and that genius belongs to none other than me, your favorite crafty planner, conspirator, and invincible fighting bulldog, Vulcano Volkan! The day I conquer the world is near, and he who rebels against me will be so badly torn to

shreds that not even the fleas will be able to pick him apart!”

“Uh, big brother...” Dörtin started.

“Yes, younger brother?”

“That’s it for the hot water. You used it all just now, you know,” Dörtin answered plainly.

“Wh-What?”

All of Volkan’s movement stopped cold.

But Dörtin continued to speak.

“You used a full pot, and it takes some time to boil more. You’re gonna have to wait.”

“...”

A breeze blew through the scene. Tiffes’ drenched hair did not flutter, but the light wind stroked Claiomh’s face.

It continued to blow quietly through the trees around them.

Dörtin closed the window above them just as quietly, probably off to the kitchen to boil more water.

Pat stayed silent and still, pretending to be dead.

Claiomh stayed still, her expression unchanging, the chains in her hands silent.

“Oh Volkan~ ♪,” She finally called with a wide smile.

Volkan seemed frozen where he stood. But she continued to speak to him, unconcerned.

“What’s your next attack, I wonder~ ♪?”

“...”

“If there isn’t any more planned, I’d like to get a little closer to you. I have so many things I want to talk to you about~ ♪”

“...”

“And you see this pretty chain here? It’s about three meters long. If you get

close enough, I might be able to use two meters of it on you~♥”

“...”

“I think Orphen and his lot are about to come home, so I can ask for his help with tying this heap of metal to the end of the chain, and then we can look for a nice deep flowing river to toss it all in~♥”

“Um... Is this a different personality... or a way you two communicate or something?” Tiffes groaned, face a bit pale.

“Don’t say ‘you two’. It’s as if we’re the same horrid breed,” Claiomh sniffed, chains rattling in her hands.

At that moment—

With a gentle thunk, something hit the ground behind her.

She looked back in surprise, only to find Volkan had fallen from the roof, head sinking into the ground.

“You know you didn’t need to make a suicide dive like that to get down, right? I could have pulled you down myself and then found a nice river to float you down so you can leave us all the bloody hell alone.”

“Ah, oh, no—” Tiffes answered her, his face going white as a sheet, horrified at Volkan’s swan dive.

“Hm...?”

Claiomh’s eyes narrowed as she followed his gaze upward. Up until just a little while ago, Volkan had been standing there. And now...

There, another familiar figure stood.

She found herself falling into doubt, looking at that silhouette.

Why is there an adorable Claiomh, me, below that masked man on the roof, I wonder?

But she had no way of knowing that black hoods and black masks were the styling ways of the Tower assassins.

How could she know?

Chapter IV: Ridden Hard and Put Away Wet in The Early Afternoon

“After all of that, he won’t even meet with me. Forte sure has a pair to pull something like this,” Leticia said, hands folded behind her head.

Her manor was already visible, a house on a slope—

The three of them walked leisurely.

“Well, he seemed pretty busy,” Orphen interjected as they walked, while Leticia looked forward, eyes distant. This part of the city was pretty quiet, with little traffic throughout the day.

“He did seem pretty busy, but, well, whatever. At least our paperwork was accepted faster than I thought it would be. That reminds me, about Majic’s acceptance...” Orphen started, looking at Majic walking next to them.

“I already applied once on his behalf to the Tower’s program.”

“...Yeah, I know,” Orphen responded simply in reply. Majic himself didn’t talk much.

“Honestly, I don’t really recommend you go through with this,” Leticia said, looking up at her house and its familiar red roof. In truth, her eyes weren’t that great, and she squinted, narrowing her eyes so they appeared heavily lidded.

She could’ve sworn she saw something on the roof.

“...?”

And yet, just as quickly as it appeared, the figure on the roof vanished without a trace.

Did they just... jump off the roof?!

Just then, a scream rang out from that side of the house.

Leticia was on her guard immediately.

“Something happened at home. We’d better get going! Hurry!” She said, and ran ahead of them.

The Tower's robes weren't as easy to move in as they could have been, but they managed to hurry, with Leticia leading the pack back to the manor.

In the entryway, there were a whole bunch of people that probably shouldn't have been there. Almost all of the entire crew was assembled there: Tiffes (who was somehow soaked to the bone in sweat), Pat (who was faceplanted firmly into the soil of the flowerbed), and Volkan (who was, for whatever reason, buried into the soil of the yard headfirst, as if he'd fallen straight down onto his face). The only person that wasn't accounted for was Dortin.

Finally, there was Claiomh, whose gold locks were dyed bright red with blood for some reason.

"Claiomh!" Orphen shouted. He rushed over with Majic to the girl with the seemingly broken head.

Claiomh slowly opened her eyes.

"Or...phen..." she murmured, slowly removing her hand from the wound on her head. She looked confused, wondering why she was bleeding so freely. Then she felt blood and remembered the pain. She closed her eyes tightly and collapsed to the ground.

Leki spun around her, yipping anxiously.

"Hey... Hey!" Orphen shouted, holding the girl up in his arms. Leticia slowly came over, and saw that resting against Orphen's shoulder was Claiomh's face, streaked with blood and tears. The wound itself was a small rend in her flesh right at the temple. Surely it would heal without a trace, it was so small.



However, it was a strange wound; and obviously not made with a knife. It also was unlikely that whoever attacked her had used a blunt instrument.

But if neither of those things were the case, it could've been that whatever force that had been used, had been used with the goal of completely eliminating her, and that would've been enough.

The wound was a clean scratch, but the shape of it indicated a knife hadn't been used.

Instead, it looked like she'd been poked with some kind of sharp stick.

Leticia had been running this whole time, so she breathed heavily as she came to a full stop before them. She pushed back her bangs, which were soaked with sweat, and looked closely at Claiomh.

Needless to say, the Tower assassin that paid them a visit had already made a prompt exit, but he'd left evidence that he'd been there behind.

Leticia turned her eyes towards Tiffes, who looked like he was panicking, and he answered her unspoken question.

"I-I don't know. I don't know what happened," he said, "But it seemed like suddenly an assassin or something just appeared on the roof. And when Claiomh asked who they were, they came down from the roof and poked her with their finger."

"Their finger?" Leticia asked, and suddenly remembered something.

This may not have happened because the assassin had wanted to kill Claiomh. But with a blow this severe, it would have been inevitable anyway, with Claiomh dying as a result.

"Who did this?"

"I'm not sure. They hid their face with a mask, and it looked like their robes were standard battle-grade robes from the Tower."

"One of the Tower assassins, then..." Leticia murmured to herself. "Did they run off?"

"Yeah, towards the city center."

“Wait just a damned second!” Leticia shouted, side-eying him. It even startled Pat, who hadn’t bothered to glance up at all whatsoever up until that point.

But she hadn’t been shouting at them

She’d been shouting at Orphen, who had started to rise to his feet.

The look he returned was one of smoldering fury.

“I can’t wait. I have to go after them—”

“I’m telling you not to!” she screamed at him, already rushing in his direction. But he still was slowly rising to his feet, Claiomh in his arms.

She stared back at him, then groaned and looked away.

“It sounds like you know what’s going on, but let me just warn you, Krylancelo. If you happen to get yourself into more trouble, know that the elders won’t be so lenient this time.”

“So you knew about that, then—”

“Why don’t you listen to me? Is it because you can’t? Or because you won’t?”

As Leticia yelled at him, Orphen went silent. He stayed quiet, and that allowed her to continue to speak.

“I hope you’re listening because here’s the plan. I will chase after the assassin, not *you*. And you will take care of Claiomh. Okay? Got it?”

“You do realize your opponent is one of the Tower assassins though, right? Even though you’re great at combat—”

“And that’s why I’m going after them myself. Only a third-rate Stabber would be stupid enough to strike a woman in broad daylight like this. I’ll deal with them myself.”

As Leticia spoke, she stripped out of her Tower robes. Under her robes, she usually wore special underwear for times like these. Because normal people didn’t really understand why she or others had specialized in battle craft, she tended not to talk about it much, or even show it to people. Today had been one of those days she’d been glad she hadn’t worn it.

In her usual black shirt and beige slacks, Leticia headed to the back of the

property. As she did so, she found herself mired in deep and muddy thought.

Krylancelo really has no self-control these days, huh...

She tied back her long, troublesome hair, and went through the front gate that still had the sofa and chains sitting nearby.

I wonder if I'll be able to look that calm if I get injured like that one day? I'm gonna get rid of this asshole. And just what did he mean when he said 'even if it's me'?

She thought to herself as she looked over her shoulder. Orphen used sorcery to moisten his handkerchief, and wiped away some of the blood on Claiomh.

And either way, it's been too long in terms of being able to track this guy down. I'm not sure I'll be able to find them now, she thought, slowing her mental mumble down to a crawl as she considered that fact. She stopped moving.

While she was frozen in place, she turned around. She looked over, and immediately beside the gate and under the front fence—

There stood a small figure dressed completely in black.

She silently stared at them.

The person's mask had deep-set carved eyes, hiding their eyes from whoever could see them, and their facial expressions were obscured beneath it. Everything the assassin wore was undoubtedly Tower-supplied and approved for use in the field.

"...!"

The assassin noticed her.

Shit.

They started moving towards her in an instant.

Leticia shrunk in on herself, trying to make herself smaller.

Then—

They passed by her side.

She couldn't even scream, there was no time. Instead she turned around, following the assassin closely behind.

They started to run down the road closest to her property, and there was no one on it.

Then something occurred to Leticia.

Are they... Are they inviting me to chase them?

If that wasn't the case, then why else would the assassin just hang around by her front gate? It made no sense.

This probably isn't the best time to go after them alone, but...

Leticia started to run.

The shape of a man, an assassin who'd invaded her home a few nights before, appeared.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, he was the one running ahead of her.

It was so odd seeing him in broad daylight, she thought to herself. Assassins weren't supposed to be visible, and especially not during the day. Of course, one didn't want to meet them at night, either.

So what're they after this time? They broke into my home, dug around, found nothing, then came back again and hurt Claiomh. What are they trying to do?

There wasn't necessarily some deeper meaning, though. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, after all. But in this case, she wasn't so sure.

If he's an elder, he could've just come to me directly, instead of going through another elder and their classes like this. And I don't think I've ever harmed another elder before. I would hope someone would tell me if I had , she thought as she ran. And if an elder didn't order this hit, does that mean the assassins are acting independently now? Maybe that's it. But why would my manor be their target? That doesn't make any sense either...

Leticia thought about what Orphen had said to her.

The assassin had been looking for something.

I'm not sure how the Browning family deals with incidents like these...

In any case, she couldn't remember hearing anything about it.

As she found herself mired in deep thought, the assassin's feet, neither too fast nor too slow, continued to guide her path. She continued to move forward.

The only thing halted in its tracks was her logic.

I know about everything I have in my home. And if this is really one of the Tower assassins, then they're one of Wall's students.

Wall Kahlen was the professor who taught some of the most dangerous students of the Tower; the assassins.

But—

She decided to cut her train of thought right there, and concentrate instead on the movement of her feet.

It doesn't matter. That house is my home, and my home is the only bit of peace that I have in this life. Period.

She continued to run, pushing aside further thought into the assassin's potential motives.

Even in the tidily (re)built Tefurem, there were blindspots where one couldn't see anything at all. As she'd run, Leticia had gotten lost in what was basically her own backyard. Even as her mental map of the place unfolded in her head, she tried to remember the roads she'd run through, the corners of each turn.

And this area was called—

“Labyrinth Row. That's what this area is called.”

After the Sand War, this area had been where temporary housing for the construction workers had been built. Near the end of the acceptance period for the family registers for various residents of the area, it turned out that far more people were seeking residence there in Labyrinth Row than were expected. As a result, this area had been eventually integrated into construction plans on behalf of the city to compensate for the population density. Taking one look at the area, that much was obvious. But because of that overcompensation, the number of alleys in the area had earned it its name.

As Leticia remembered that, she hit her palm with her fist in frustration. Then

she held her breath for a little while, staring at the entrance to the next alley.

She knew that the assassin was all but inviting her in.

A trap would be waiting for her. That was just common sense talking.

And them disappearing is them telling me “you don’t need to follow me anymore”, I guess...

However, the moment she stepped onto the dry strip of narrow road, there was absolutely no signs of life. The four story buildings to the right and the left were completely silent.

As if the area itself had been abandoned.

Originally it seemed that it had been a bunch of apartments at some point, and an empty flower pot could be seen in the window on the second floor of the building on the left from her vantage point.

Even if I needed to be saved like a damsel in distress, there would be no one around to do it. You could say this is a clear invitation for me to come on in, a set and baited trap.

After suddenly stopping, deep in thought, she started to walk once more.

And after my brother clowning on me that way, I’m just angry enough to try to do it, if only to prove him wrong , she found herself thinking hazily. If it’s only one assassin, I should be okay. So far there doesn’t seem to be any sign of an ambush, or of me being surrounded, so...

Blowing out a breath, she nodded to herself.

The length of the alley itself wasn’t even a full block. The space between buildings was narrow, side streets sprouting off everywhere, but not large enough to allow an adult to wedge their bodies into. Given the small size of the assassin, they could have been hiding in such a place, but probably would not have been able to fully pass through it into another alley.

“Might’ve been a good idea to bring weapons,” she muttered to herself. Admittedly, she wasn’t too great at hand-to-hand combat. She tried to swallow her anxiety, but it wasn’t working very well.

“That’s what Krylancelo is good at. Same with Childman. They were always

better at that weird kung fu compared to me,” she muttered to herself and then rounded the corner.

She stopped again.

The alley was a dead end. And the door in the abandoned building ahead of her had been left open.

Inside of the well-lit building, there were no people nor warnings, just air circulating freely through the halls.

The emergency exit was more like a kitchen door than an actual emergency exit. There was a sturdy iron door with a key that could be easily opened from the inside.

Its old rusty hinges groaned in protest as it swung open.

The door was directly connected to the corridor, straight ahead and to the front entrance. However, the door at the front was tightly closed. A spare piece of wood was tied to the handle with a chain to keep it closed.

Near the front entrance, there was a window that seemed to belong to the caretakers' room. There was a passage that turned immediately to the left, and if one did not turn there, one would end up at the emergency exit where Leticia was now standing. There was no door to reach the room ahead of her, and one could not go anywhere without entering the hallway of that other room to the left. Even the stairs seemed to be there and in her way.

The corridor was cleaned up as if it had been caught up in a sweep or sting, and making the decision to move elsewhere seemed to be a losing strategy.

Even if I could just figure out where my opponent is, I could figure out what to do next, Leticia thought to herself, frowning and rubbing the back of her neck in frustration. There seemed to be no choice but to proceed, even though she wasn't sure how to.

She banged her heels down once against the floor, then clicked her tongue in annoyance. She took a deep breath, and stepped out carefully. Then she was able to proceed without making any loud sounds.

She chose the passage that turned left and looked into it briefly before

stepping into it. It was bright inside due to the amount of windows that lined the walls. There were more doors opposite the windows. Stairs were visible from the end of the hallway.

Keeping her eye on the door, she carefully advanced down the hallway.

Ker-chak!

“...!”

A sound of breaking glass echoed throughout the hallway, but it wasn't from this floor. It was from the floor above her.

“Seems like my date is waiting for me upstairs,” she murmured to herself, stroking her lip with a thumbnail.

Then she started running up the stairs at once.

The moment she set foot on the second floor, the sound rang out again.

—Chak!

For the love of... How kind of them to tell me where they are... , she thought to herself poisonously, and continued ascending.

When she got to the third floor, the sound rang out yet again.

They're on the top floor, then , Leticia thought, figuring it out, and quickly went up the last flight of stairs as fast as she could.

As soon as she got up to the last floor, she felt it.

Someone was behind her.

“...!” She mentally screamed in alarm and threw herself forward, kicking the floor as she rolled across it, flipping backward as she retreated.

Just then, a sharp wind passed through where she'd just been standing.

At the center of the whirlwind was a silver blade, a cold, slender sword that made a high pitched whine as it sliced through the air.

The one who'd flung the sword down was the assassin. Their face was facing away from Leticia, so she couldn't even see their eye color.

Holding the sword, in their hand, the assassin finally faced her, and their low

voice came from under their mask.

“How sad, that you’ve come and chased me out here all alone. Pitiful, really.”

“Sorry, what? I can’t hear you mumbling like that,” Leticia replied sharply. She prepared herself, and started to craft her spell. On the scale of spells and sorcery alone, few could match her, even in Childman’s classes. Even compared to her sister Azalie. Leticia was on the level of Corgon, another student of Childman.

“I’m saying it’s pitiful precisely because you’ve come out here chasing after me, you know.”

“—What?” Leticia stuttered in a sudden voice. The voice she’d just heard was not from the assassin, but from behind her. She couldn’t help but ignore the assassin now, putting her back against the wall, and looked to her left.

On her left, the assassin in black.

She looked to her right.

On her right was—

“Hydrant?!”

On her right was one of the Tower of Fangs’ youngest Executive Council candidate. The mask he wore wasn’t one supplied by the Tower, but it was one big enough to hide the scars of his that covered him so thoroughly that ‘scars’ no longer felt an accurate term. He wore a black robe as well.

In other words, he looked the same as he usually did.

“I’ll be honest with you. I wanted to lure out Krylancelo and catch him, but ended up settling on dealing with you. Though I wasn’t too concerned which I ended up catching.”

“Milan.”

Hydrant was finally called by his real name, his darker name.

“Try to avoid pointless chatter, please.”

“I have to interrogate her anyway.”

“...”

Leticia muttered to herself as she listened to their back and forth.

“I didn’t even sense him,” she said to herself darkly.

“You shouldn’t rely too much on the skills you’ve developed, you know. You can always erase signs of yourself so others can’t see or feel them. I would expect you to know that by now,” Hydrant snorted.

“What’s your goal with all of this?” she asked him, squinting in suspicion.

An ambitious smile appeared through the gap in Hydrant’s mask.

He spoke plainly.

“The Browning Family’s *World* .”

“World..?” Leticia repeated as a question, as if she’d never heard of the word before. She looked down.

Hydrant shrugged dismissively.

“Even if you don’t personally know about it, one of you probably does.”

“You mean the other students of Childman, right?”

“Well, yes,” he answered, coming a bit closer.

Leticia readied herself before speaking.

“You know I can’t speak about that so freely, right?”

“You know we can’t let you go so freely, then, right?” The assassin in black countered. She’d been staring so intently at Hydrant that she’d almost forgotten the other man was there. And suddenly she felt it.

Intent. Murderous intent.

Death?!

Leticia had a feeling this wasn’t going to end well. She jumped to the opposite wall, the one with the window. There was absolutely no time to construct a spell. She jumped with her arms pulled inward to protect her vital organs.

But that murderous intent pursued her.

Suddenly, silence fell.

And then she heard it.

That same slicing sound as before.

She looked over her shoulder and saw the man in black (complete with a black sword in his hand) splattered with blood.

That blade had definitely been cutting some kind of flesh.

And then the pain hit her.

Somewhere deep in her body, pain made its way to her brain, and it hit her suddenly like a club to the head.

“Ugh... Ow!”

Despite the pain, Leticia once again pressed her back against the wall. She knelt in place, trying to find where she’d been injured. Thunder rolled in the background as she took inventory on her condition.

She found it.

It was her left hand.

Originally the attack had probably been aimed at her abdomen, but she’d reacted too quickly, putting her hand over it to protect it. Her pinky and ring finger had been nearly severed, and at least one bone was broken.

She looked at her hand, and thought that if she didn’t immediately find a spell to heal it, she’d probably die. A fresh, damp fountain of blood leaked from her maimed hand.

Die? If I die, will anyone cry for me? Krylancelo, will you cry for me? Wait. I can’t call you that anymore, you’d get angry. Will you cry for me, like you did for Azalie at her funeral?

At the same time she’d started to piece together a spell, the silver blade once again appeared within view.

If you don’t dodge it this time, it’s coming for your neck! , she thought to herself.

She couldn’t move much, but at least was able to attempt an evasive roll. The spell she’d been crafting dissipated into the surrounding air. Blood followed her

as if she'd been leaving a trail of crimson breadcrumbs.

"Hhh," she breathed, pain drowning out her other senses. Her body shuddered in agony, and she raised her head, clutching her left hand tightly against her.

Her clothes were already soaked with blood, and it spread outward until it touched Hydrant's toes. He too had a sword in his hand.

And it had been him, not the assassin, who had made the second cut.

"Good decision."

His voice sounded as if he were smiling. He bent down to pick up something laying in the pool of blood.

He examined the thin object. "Ah, but you did lose a finger in process," he lamented, showing it to her. "Though it still moves."

Her vision was fading fast, and Hydrant was starting to disappear from before her eyes.

Leticia was terrified.

I think I'm gonna faint...

She chewed her lower lip, left arm weakened due to blood loss. She had to find a way to stay conscious, and chewing her lip didn't burn any more energy or make her lose any more stamina than she already was at the moment.

"Makes no sense for her to die, you know," she heard the man in black say to Hydrant. But even then, his voice was very difficult to hear.

She thought she heard Hydrant respond. But she couldn't hear it.

Prof...ess...or...

The word barely managed to string itself together in her head as she thought desperately, clinging to it like a prayer.

As if it would save her life.

Leticia's face dropped to the floor.

She vaguely felt something huge and overwhelming starting to run through

her head—

Perhaps it was delirium, but she heard voices. A few voices that only remained in fragments of her memories.

“You won’t die because you’ve lost a few fingers—”

“But if you do let go, you’ll die. Perhaps we can make a de—”

“Humph. Only one book remai—”

“Are you gonna tell Professor Childman—”

“He can go fuck himself for all I care. This is the wound I got and I need to take care of it ASAP—”

“If you have an axe to grind, you better go exercise it before you die—”

“Just because my fingers are gone—”

“And I still only have one book, here—”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. If you have a grudge—”

Her memories began to fade to black, and time itself seemed to collapse.

All Leticia could do was wait for her darkening memories to speak, and she felt herself starting to lose herself and her sanity as she lay there crying in the dark.

“You see this wound I got—”

“I can’t give her up. I just can’t—”

“Don’t pull it out—”

...?! Leticia wondered wordlessly, as the voice of the woman who’d spoken first now blended into the voice of another.

“You guys—”

It was Hydrant’s voice, or that of his assassin friend. An astonishing, spectacular voice—

“Actually, I thought it would be useless even if you did hand it over to me—”

Upon hearing that voice, Leticia regained consciousness for a brief moment.

But she stayed on the floor, because she had no strength to get up.

That's...?!

Leticia just screamed aimlessly, possibly in horror, though no sound came out of her throat.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't attend your funeral. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so—

Dusk approached hazily on the horizon.

It covered the upper half of the room like a black mist.

From the window, the red sun could be seen, like a radiant scarlet fruit. As if it were staring into the window—

Finally Leticia realized she'd regained consciousness.

She moved her head left and right on a hard white pillow. White walls, a white ceiling. The smell of disinfectant and soap. A flower in a vase without a pattern. An empty bed. Clean sheets. A ceiling curtain rail. A jug and—

There was a man in the room, standing by the window and staring outside.

For a moment, she didn't know who it was.

Childman...?

No, it wasn't him. Not in the least. The man wasn't tall nor long-haired like Childman had been. His body was also slightly smaller than the continent's best Black Sorcerer. He was of medium weight. His eyes were rather severe, and provided a sort of bitter edge to the scene. That man was—

No, it's not Krylancelo... Leticia sighed to herself in her own head. The man hadn't noticed she'd awakened, and continued to look out the window.

She stared at him for a good long while, but then she suddenly opened her mouth.

"Thank you."

When she murmured those words, the man turned around. He approached her, somewhat in a panic.

"Tish!"

“Is Claiomh okay?”

“Ah, she only ended up with a few scratches. And a concussion too. She made a big old deal out of it for nothing. She’s fine.”

Suddenly he noticed his bad posture, and corrected it before looking back up at her.

He lowered his tone of voice before continuing his train of thought.

“But... Tish. About your injuries—”

“Mmhmm?” She answered, gently pulling out her heavily bandaged left hand, which had been rested underneath the blanket she had on.

The man seemed to gently look away. Although it was a subtle gesture, Leticia still noticed.

“Your fingers are safe. We did some first aid— I mean, I didn’t, but the rest of us here did. I’m not too worried about suppuration at this point in time, though,” he coughed out, and continued, “Once your nerves were completely severed, they couldn’t be completely healed with sorcery. They could only stick your fingers back on your hand, and the only way for them to heal is to allow the nerves to heal naturally. And too much time had gone by, so peripheral neuropathy kind of just happened. The nerves died.”

“Is that right...” She said quietly, blowing out a breath. She nodded and looked up at his face. She continued, “Well, it’s my fault for allowing that blunder to happen. I’ve made my bed, so it’s time for me to lie in it, I suppose.”

After she said that, then Leticia realized something.

“What are you thinking, Krylancelo?”

He stared at her expressionlessly, the same dead face he’d been making as he’d been staring out the window earlier.

Then he answered immediately, with a deep, shaking breath.

“That I’m going to kill every last one of those rat bastards.”

“Don’t you dare!” Leticia shouted at him. Her blood-soaked clothes had been changed when she was admitted to the hospital. She leaned on him minutely,

looking as if she were weak and about to fall back asleep. “Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare do anything boneheaded when you’re this angry.”

“What’s boneheaded about it? They tried to kill you,” he put emphasis on the second statement, looking at her, his anger loud and clear.

“Boneheaded is about the only thing I can call what you’re planning to do.”

“They’re the boneheaded ones. You know that, right? Because they dared to put their hands on you.”

“And that’s exactly why I think it’s too high a price for you to exchange your life for two of my fingers!,” Leticia shouted, then sighed deeply. “You doing that wouldn’t make me happy.”

“Then enlighten me. Tell me, Tish, what am I supposed to do?”

“Contact Forte,” she said slowly, the pounding of his heart nearly audible.

“I don’t think Wall and his students knew the intent behind all of this, but they still tried to abduct me anyway. And now they’ve failed, which is really quite catastrophic for them. We can encourage Wall and his students to do the right thing here. And I’m glad for that, in all honesty! This is the perfect opportunity to take Wall and his students and his classes apart and tear them down for good,” she said, loosening her shoulders.

“And,” she added, “I should be able to be discharged soon. I would have been able to be cured if Comicon were still alive. But he died once Corgon left. And where did Corgon go? I still wonder...”

Leticia stopped speaking and smiled sadly.

“Suddenly,” she murmured, hands shaking, “Everyone, all of our friends and colleagues from the Tower are gone.”

She pulled herself together before continuing, “Please, if you care about me at all, you won’t go after them. Not now. Don’t go after anyone in the Tower, either, while you’re at it. Give us some time to heal and get our bearings first, won’t you?”

“...”

He did not answer her. She could feel the smile on her face loosening, the

muscles relaxing.

“Please don’t leave me alone in this city. Please, please, please don’t leave me alone here,” she whispered, resting her forehead on his chest.

She leaned on him for a little while, because she could, and allowed herself to weep.

Even though she was strong enough to halt the flow of tears, she still allowed herself to weep.

And at that moment, that was enough.

Chapter V: The Sound of Footsteps After Twilight

The sky bled blue and descended to meet them.

First, the trees and plants started to darken.

And then, the night began.

By the time they came back to the manor, it was night.

They opened the gate and entered the front yard.

“You’re back awfully late,” came a voice from next to the gate. Orphen looked at her, unsurprised by her sudden comment.

It was as he predicted. Or perhaps it was better to say that he knew she was going to be there, waiting, as a general rule.

He faced her.

“Azalie...”

Orphen watched as she made small, halted movements as they stood concealed in the darkness. And then he realized with a sigh that she wanted to get closer to him, but was restraining herself.

Then she suddenly stopped moving altogether, as if distracted by something.

“Are you sleeping properly? You look a bit tired. I can see how hunched over your shoulders are.”

He heard her question, but ignored it.

“Why have you slithered out from underneath your rock, Azalie? What do you want?” He said, not looking at her.

“No particular reason, really. You said you had a room ready for me here, didn’t you?”

“Azalie—” He warned her in an unamused tone. Her light expression didn’t change until she doubled over in snorting laughter from her nose.

“If you’re so insistent on making me your monster under the bed, you’re going to lose to Wall Kahlen, you know.”

“...Huh?” Orphen replied to her, blinking and confused. There wasn’t much light coming from the house, as there were only a few people living there and no servants that served them. There was only one lit room, and it gave the house a haunted vibe.

So one could say that it was pure coincidence that the light from a small gas lamp happened to illuminate her brown eyes as she stood in the deepening shadows of the night.

Azalie continued to speak, her eyes the only two bright spots in the darkness.

“Let’s go to the courtyard.”

The courtyard of Leticia’s property was sandwiched between the two main wings of the buildings. It was several times larger than the front yard. It was also used as a playground, with benches and a manmade pond, making it a good place to rest.

In a sense, this was the center of the property, the beating heart of the house.

“Light,” Azalie muttered, and a white phosphorescent flame appeared over the pond, sparkling brilliantly. Orphen watched as the rays of light played along the surface of the water, the light slowly melting into darkness.

She walked ahead, and turned around. The black combat robes she wore seemed to make her smaller than she usually appeared.

Or maybe because I always thought of her as tall when I was a kid, and that isn’t really squaring with reality , Orphen thought to himself.

Then Azalie spoke to him.

“If you keep saying stuff like this, people may misconstrue what you’re trying to tell me, you know. It sounds like you’re almost envious.”

“On the way home from the hospital, I took a little side trip.”

“...Oh? Did you ask the Tower for a messenger?”

“ ...”

Orphen eyed her wordlessly.

She met his gaze for a moment, then glanced back into the night.

Azalie did not seem to need a confirmation from him on this one.

“Tish said you should do that, right? It seems like she would do something like that,” She opined with a shrug.

“The messenger’s probably gotten to the Tower by now. Unless there was an unfortunate accident along the way.”

“W-What?!” he asked her, eyes wide in surprise as he glanced back at her. He did understand what she was implying, but—

“Do you really think Wall and his student goons are gonna hit the messenger’s carriage?”

“It would be great if him doing so ended all of this nonsense, but alas...”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” Azalie said, her fingers drifting through the night sky before coming to point at the house. “They’re going for their endgame. Their last resort.”

“Their last resort...” Orphen repeated, voice empty.

An assassin’s last resort. There was only one of those.

Azalie’s reply was light, as if dancing in the dark.

“Yes. The Stab, as you know. It doesn’t matter who their enemy is. That’s always their last resort.”

“Shut up. You don’t know that!” Orphen shouted loud enough that he hated himself. “Even Tafurem has a judiciary. And the Tower’s Executive Council is neither helpless neither incompetent. Even attacking Tish would cause some divisions in that group, I’m sure.”

“Forte, Tish, you... Also me, because I saw Hydrant’s face. They’ll try to erase us all from the continent sometime late tonight, probably.”

She put a finger on her lips and added, “Tomorrow, when the Executive Council begins to move, slightly senior sorcerer Tish will have already had a raid on her house. Then, as a response, the Council will have one of two choices to make: will they dismantle Wall and his classes for good? Or will they detain

them? But by then, whoever's behind this will have already declared checkmate."

"That makes no sense!" Orphen spat, venom heavy in his voice. "If they were to take us out, that would just make our case for us, and their crimes would just pile up. No matter how powerful Wall and his students are, they still don't have the same amount of firepower and force that the Tower itself has.

"But if you need to, you know you can run, right?"

"...What did you say?" Orphen replied, glancing at Azalie's face. She scratched her temple with a finger, and continued her train of thought.

"I'm not sure how to say this, so I'm just going to say it. You see, it's not like they're targeting *you* specifically. They're targeting *all* of Childman's former students."

"...Yeah, that makes even less sense."

Upon hearing that, Azalie sharpened her expression. She stood at a crossroads between light and darkness as she replied to him.

"No, that's not right. It does make sense, when you know their objectives. This time, they're trying to find the Browning Family's World Book."

"World... Book?" Orphen asked, somewhat suspiciously. Azalie had stated it so naturally, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Most likely that's the first you've heard of it. It certainly is news to me, as the first time I heard about it from the elders was two weeks ago."

"The elders... killing them?" That seemed to be the biggest takeaway for Orphen. Azalie shrugged and then rephrased her words.

"The World Book... Well, explaining it is going to take a little while. At most, it's only one book. One volume. A bundle of paper and glue that can either make people die or wish they had."

"Okay, but what exactly is it?"

"Its origin story starts two hundred years ago," Azalie murmured, sitting back on the bench. "You know that the aristocrats basically own all of the Nornir artifacts on the continent, right?"

“Yeah,” Orphen agreed after a bit of hesitation.

Azalie chuckled, knowing what he was trying to say.

“Of course, there are some sites that have been concealed by the Continental Sorcerers’ Association, and some have ended up owned by them after making a deal. The largest archeological site still belongs to the Union of Lords. Do you know where that site is?”

“The World-Seeing Tower?” As Orphen answered, he turned his gaze to the World-Seeing Tower in the distance. One couldn’t really even see the top of the Tower from the manor.

“Yeah, that’s it. And now you know why. We were barred from investigating The World-Seeing Tower by the Kimluck Church via the Union of Lords. But the Church has known about why the Tower was constructed for a long time.”

“Why the Tower was constructed?”

“That’s right. As in, why did the Nornir build the World-Seeing Tower?” Azalie raised her finger as she spoke. “It’s definitely for human sorcerers. It was left behind for us by our ancestors, and it’s them saying to us, ‘Should you question the world, look to the Tower.’ It’s a powerful device for sorcery, and it was used two hundred years ago for powerful spells. Our ancestors used the Tower to these ends, spending a lot of effort, blood, sweat, tears, and sacrifice.”

Then her finger pointed straight at Orphen.

“And they brought about just one book.”

“...”

Orphen did not answer and looked at her finger. She noticed his gaze and turned her fingers around, as if she were amused. Then she continued to speak.

“That book is called the World Book.”

“And what was written in this World Book?”

“The secrets of the world, of course.” She stopped waving around her fingers. “It’s about everything that the Nornir wanted us to be aware of as their descendants. You could say that it’s a history book about their world, the world of the gods.”

“You actually trying to say that this book was written by god?” Orphen snorted derisively. When he saw Azalie give a straight-faced nod, though, a chill ran down his spine.

“The actual name of the book of Swedenborge. Did you know that?”

“As in the Demon King Swedenborge? The guy who fought the gods here on the continent before Kiesalhima’s history actually begun? That’s just an origin myth for the gods then, isn’t it?”

“The Kimluck folks believe in the gods from that era. Surely you believe in the Demon King, don’t you?”

She recoiled and sat up from her place on the bench.

“Swedenborge, a sorcerer who conquered everything, including both angels and demons. He breathed time, ate the night sky, and surpassed the mortal needs of hunger. And that is the book that he wrote.”

She got closer to Orphen and murmured, “The World Book was summoned to the World-Seeing Tower two hundred years ago. The Kimluck bastards knew about the book far before we sorcerers did. Not sure why. I guess that’s the secret to their success...”



Orphen tried to escape her and her voice, tried to back away, but couldn't. When he spoke, it felt like he was arguing with her.

"I don't really care about any of that. You realize that if this book is in the World-Seeing Tower, Wall Kahlen or his thug students won't be able to get their hands on it, right? It's even less related to me and Tish than the rest of what's been going on around here lately."

"Ah, but that's *if* it's still being kept there," Azalie fired back in a sly whisper.

Orphen's face stiffened in confusion. "Something happened, then. So what happened?"

"Oh, that's easy to explain. Forty years ago, the Kimluck Church and the Sorcerers basically got divorced during the Sand War. As a result, the Kimluck Church, in a fit of rage, aimed to take the book from the World-Seeing Tower. To do so, they would need a distraction. So they destroyed Tefurem, stole the book, and ran away with it."

"...So then..."

"I know what you want to say. You were thinking the same thing before, weren't you? If it's with the Kimluck, then Wall would have to deal with the same thing we would in regards to getting the book away from them. That is the case, and ever since the end of the Sand War, it has become a Church treasure, and is now guarded by their head priest and his household, the Brownings. At least, until ten years ago."

She spread her arms, explaining smoothly.

"But their treasure is something that was once stolen. The hilarious thing is, it was just an average thief that stole the book from the Browning family. They probably haven't even noticed the value of the book they got. I wonder if they sold it to a used bookstore? And thus, the World Book flowed back to where it once came, albeit through a roundabout route. Though we don't know where it went for several years."

"But when they figured out where it went, what did they do?"

Orphen had more or less asked her exactly what she thought he was going to

ask her. She craned her neck forward towards him as she continued.

“The following news was made public to civilians last week. The World Book fell into the hands of those pesky Dragon cultists in Tefurem about six years ago. I knew a little of the book’s importance because I knew some of the older words used in it.”

“And that’s why Wall and his students went up against the cultists last week.”

“It was obviously mostly for show. Otherwise it was useless,” she said, chuckling. “They reached the cultists’ meeting place after I’d already gone and messed it up. I also smashed the door and messed that house up entirely. If I hadn’t done so, they wouldn’t have stopped what they were doing.”

After she finished saying that, her smile vanished.

“They came after I left. They saw what had happened and realized that someone had outwitted them, and for the time being, they stopped talking to each other, and disseminating information amongst themselves. By doing that, I managed to muzzle them. I heard you killed every last one of those cultists that went to meet you. And it seems like I got the exact same information that I’d already had at the time.”

“Meaning—” Orphen muttered slowly. Azalie continued to speak.

They said the same thing at the same time.

“Eventually, the World Book fell into the hands of Childman.”

“Five years ago, he did business with the cultists. Though we don’t know what kind of cajolery he employed.”

Only Azalie continued to speak. Orphen fell silent.

“Since Childman’s ‘disappearance’, the only ones who might know about the location of the World Book are us, Childman’s students. But I’m not reckless enough to go after him myself, just know that.”

“Where the hell is the World Book, Azalie!” Orphen all but shouted at her. He’d reached out to her unknowingly, and she didn’t try to avoid it, but stopped when his hand grabbed her chest.

Azalie looked down at his hand.

“Why do you think I would know?”

“If you don’t know yet, there’s no way you could or would hand that information over to me. And there’s no way I could anticipate what you would do next. And it seems like you already know the contents. I’m not sure if you’ve already read it or what,” Orphen continued to rail on, his filter clearly not working as he spoke to her.

That’s right. She’s trying to use me...

Azalie still smiled at him gently. Her eyes were mostly closed, though, and it gave a sense that she’d descended into total darkness.

“I don’t really like that line of reasoning much, so I’m deducting one point off of your score. Otherwise it was mostly perfect.”

As she spoke, as if she’d just realized it, she started to withdraw her hand, which had been reaching towards him, back to her chest.

“The World Book is in this house. I took a little bit of a look around and found it. What do you think you’re doing, asking me about its whereabouts? What are you going to do with that information, hm?”

“It should be obvious! So I can hand it over to Wall and his students so they can leave us the fuck alone!”

“No,” she bluntly responded. Her eyes seemed as if she were trying to inhale him, devour him whole. And as she watched him, she continued to speak.

“I’ll tell you why I was looking for the book. Because that book must be destroyed. It contains secrets, secrets that so many people shouldn’t see, ever...”

“Then do it. Destroy the goddamn thing. Then tell Wall that the book had been burned in a fire or thrown off a cliff or whatever you want.”

“What makes you think that he’ll be satisfied with that explanation, hm? That he’ll be able to accept it?” Azalie asked with a laugh.

“...”

At some point, he’d withdrawn within his own head, and gone quiet. It was as she said, Wall probably wouldn’t remotely believe them. But that was the

general culture within the Tower; one course of students didn't believe another course of students very easily.

I'm not getting through to her at all... because at this point, she's a woman driven by her instincts and nothing else, Orphen thought bitterly.

Azalie approached him, as if wondering if he'd arrived at understanding how she thought.

"I don't have the luxury of such a choice at this point. Tomorrow morning, the Tower's Executive Council will begin to move to stop Wall, but the elders will be too slow. Wall and his students will make their move tonight, in the middle of the night. You and Forte might manage to protect yourselves, and I might be able to protect myself too, but what about Tish? She's still gravely injured and in the hospital, and she won't be able to defend herself at all. And there's no real way we can protect her. I mean, assuming they take action starting at midnight, they'll be leaving their gathering place right about now and going to the Tower. They're cutting it close, truth be told, time-wise."

"I can't believe this," Orphen murmured to himself suddenly.

"Hm?" Azalie asked him suddenly, a gentle poke of words. Orphen heaved a huge sigh, and placed his hand on the bottom half of his face to hide the bitter smile on his lips.

"You care about Tish's wellbeing, right?"

At that moment. Azalie's eyes swung wildly upward to his, and he could see the anger in her eyes.

"Krylancelo..."

Hearing how she growled his name, he shook his head.

"Sorry. That wasn't what I meant."

"I know. I know you're worried about her. Of course you would be."

She straightened her back, and stared right at him. But it wasn't just a stare, she looked into his eyes, and as if to escape, he turned away, and continued to speak instead.

"You'll do it, won't you? You should be able to. You should be able to Stab

Wall Kahlen with no problem.”

Stab— Orphen repeated the word back to himself in his own head.

Could you do it?! he nearly shouted at her, but the words caught in his throat as he shook with anger. He looked back at her for a little while.

And then other words came tumbling out.

“I’m telling you, I’m the exact opposite of Tish.”

“And I’m telling you I understand that. I’m the only one who can understand that, probably.”

That was her telling him to calm down.

Orphen made a fist.

“And that’s why you feel that you can use me. No matter what.”

“But will you thank me? It’s as I thought... By facing off against your old self, you’ve recovered most of your former facilities, right? As Successor to the Razor’s Edge, to him, you have an indispensable power...”

You’re so selfish! Orphen screamed at her silently. As he watched, she’d taken a small black box out of her pocket. It seemed that she was able to use Space Metastasis sorcery to transfer the Nornir’s inheritance at will.

Azalie traced a complex rune on the surface of the box.

“Your cute little student is in possession of the World Book. It seems he took it from Childman’s home. The book can be used to bargain with Wall, and effectively, too.”

Countless runes made of light began to appear on the box.

As if dancing or singing, the runes swirled around the box. The size of them changed, and the light they gave off increased.

That light suddenly wrapped itself around Azalie.

And then she disappeared.

“You’re so selfish—!” Orphen shouted, finally, finally, unable to take it anymore. “Why do *you* understand me?! Why would only a murderess

understand me?!”

After shouting that, he froze in alarm.

He was not scared. He knew that.

It was not fear.

Instead, he realized that he’d been played. Used, and used thoroughly.

And now he was starkly, painfully aware of that.



...Does he know that if he screams that loudly he’s going to be heard? Like he can’t hide that...

Hiding in the mouth of the intersecting corridor, Claiomh was alone with the fish in the nearby artificial pond. Leki lay at her feet, listening disinterestedly.

That woman just now... I couldn’t really understand her because it was so dark out... But what’s going on there, I wonder?

Claiomh had the feeling she’d met the woman before. But she couldn’t remember how or when.

She sighed a bit and continued to watch Orphen for a bit there at her post by the pond, speaking to Leki every so often.

And then suddenly, a reply.

“Hm, yes, well, I think we can say that’s been lost in translation.”

“It sounds like you’re arguing for reconciliation there, you know.”

“...?!”

She looked behind her with a start, trying to find the owner of those voices.

There she found the two dwarves, dangling from the roof where they’d been bound.

“Wh-What the hell are you two doing over there?!” she screamed, and approached them.

Volkan responded with a heavy nod.

“Well,” he said, clearing his throat, “Our coup failed, and those involved were arrested. Pat was our POW, and she was the example they made of us. Such a shameful affair, all around.”

“At least you admit it was shameful, you absolute hacks...”

“She threw a rock at me. For no reason. I wasn’t even directly involved!”
Dortin moaned. For some reason he seemed to be in worse shape than Volkan was.

Suddenly Volkan looked up. They were tied back to back so that their faces weren’t side-by-side, but as they twisted slowly in the air, he looked behind his shoulder at Claiomh’s face.

“How were you not directly involved?! This beautiful and selfless brotherhood has become a house divided, and continues to be in my martyrdom!”

“I don’t even understand what you’re saying...” Claiomh sighed, and scratched her head. “Just what kind of teachings are you trying to martyr yourself for?”

“Hmph,” Volkan replied with a triumphant smile. “With my strong aspirations towards becoming a true warrior, it doesn’t really matter what religious teachings you follow. I am the truest, and best martyr you’ll ever see.”

“Ah, I think I actually get it now...” Dortin muttered.

That was about when Claiomh tuned out, sighing to herself. She bent backward a bit, trying to scratch some unreachable itch, and found herself looking up at Orphen.

“Ah, it looks like you’re back, Orphen. I’m gonna go into the house now, bye.”

“What?! What do you mean you’re not going to help us?!” Dortin yelled, crying. Claiomh faced the manor house, but she looked back at them.

“Why are you little gremlins so annoying?”

“No... No empathy... Why...”

“Why? Because I’ve been injured and I’m also dealing with some anemia as well. The blood is having a hard time reaching my brain, so keep it simple for me and don’t say stuff I won’t understand.”

“I... I don’t... Get it... Empathy... is basically the human condition?” Dortin wheezed, looking pale.

Claiomh narrowed her eyes and pointed out to the supporting pillar they were tied to.

“The pillar.”

“Ah... huh...” Dortin groaned.

Claiomh pointed to the top and bottom of the pillar and spoke in a frantic tone.

“It looks like it’s gonna give out. But if you struggle hard enough you might be able to get out of those ropes and back onto the ground, you know.”

“How the hell am I supposed to get down?!” Volkan shouted in alarm, kicking his little legs. “That pillar is bigger than an elephant’s foot! If we were able to get out of this, we’d be able to eat it, you moron! I’d rather eat rotten bananas and die that way!”

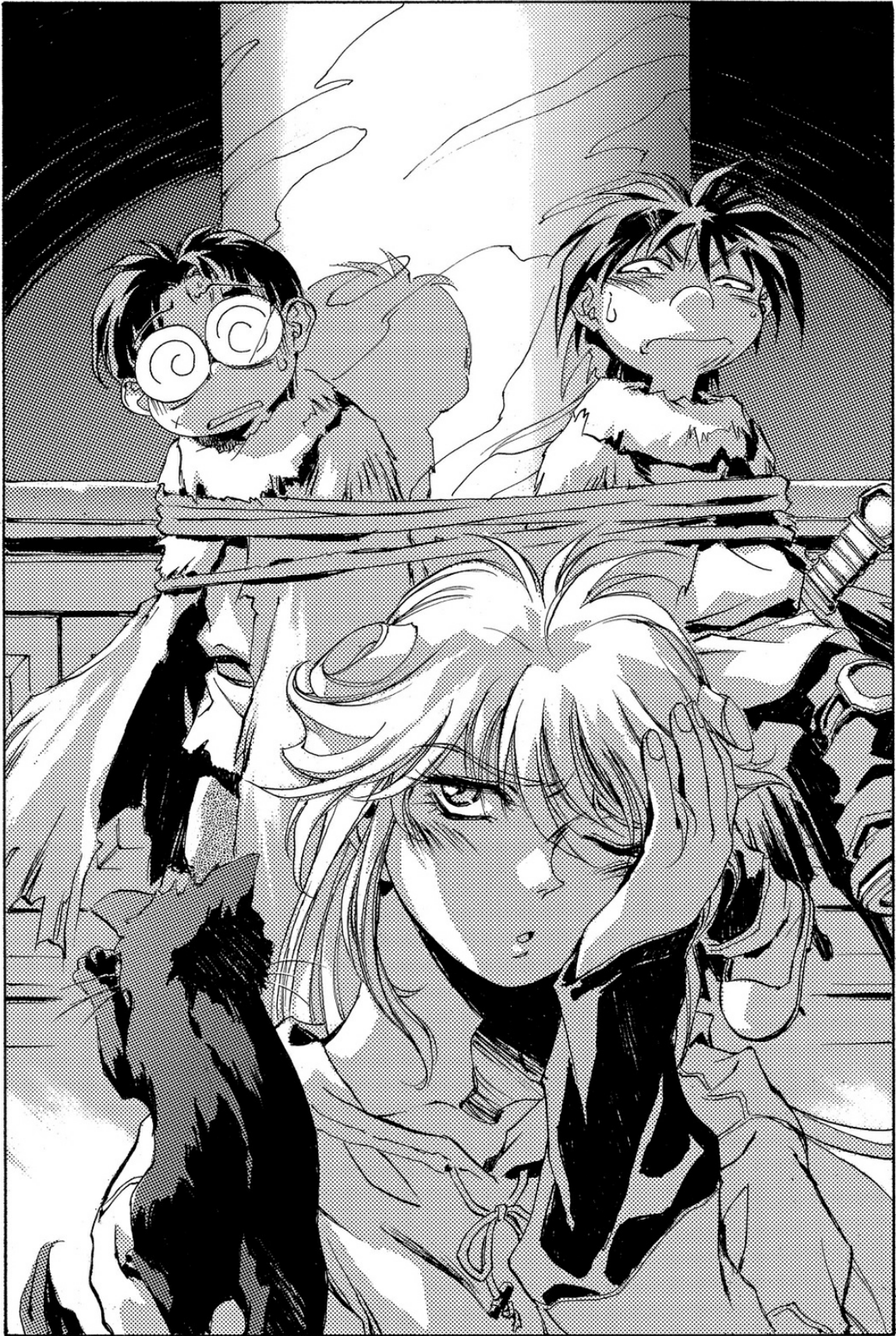
“Well, anyway. Hang in there, gentlemen~♪” Claiomh sang, waving as she left them there.

When she returned to the living room, Orphen and Majic sat speaking in low tones. It seemed like they were talking about that black leather-bound book Majic had taken to carrying with him everywhere in the past few weeks.

Cool... great... Leave me out again, why don’t you, she muttered in her own head.

She approached them anyway, her expression strange. Orphen heard her footsteps and turned around quickly.

Majic’s face was pale and wan, but it didn’t matter.



“Oh, welcome home, Orphen. How was Tish?” Claiomh asked him as she sat, stroking Lekki, who was sitting on top of her head.

Orphen nodded at her with a vague expression on his face. “She was okay. But you know...”

His voice suddenly cut out, and he looked deeply troubled.

Claiomh felt embarrassed, and anticipated what he was about to say.

It’s probably gonna be the same thing as usual...

“I’m gonna go for a walk,” Orphen said, forcing an uncomfortable laugh.

Nailed it. It’s not a big deal, I’m just going for a little bit, I’m coming back soon, or my personal favorite, Wait, I’ll be right back.

Despite wondering whether she should follow him or not, Claiomh nodded passively. Though she didn’t give up on the idea of following him at all.

“Hm?”

Majic was the only one who noticed her response was irrelevant.

Orphen continued without noticing any of that.

“I’m going to take down every single one of those fuckers that hurt Tish like this. I’m going to the Tower.”

Oh hell, at least keep your destination and reasons for going secret, so I don’t have to keep any of yours, she thought to herself.

“But I can’t do it alone.”

The fact that you only allow yourself to rely on others rarely isn’t cute, you know.

Orphen’s words finally stopped, like a gushing faucet slowing to trickle.

And then he turned his eyes to Claiomh.

“Please help me. I’m begging you to help me.”

In the end, you’re just going to leave me again, so what does it matter?

...

Claiomh stopped thinking.

Then, bit by bit, her expression loosened, and melted into something resembling a smile.

“You what?” Claiomh muttered towards him in a baffled tone.

What just happened here?

Chapter VI: A Flare at Midnight

It was already a few minutes past midnight.

When one hides in the woods at night, there's no clock to say what time it is. But somehow, one knows.

Of course, there was no bell to chime the hour. And of course, it wasn't like Orphen had been keeping track of the time since they'd left the manor.

But Orphen did know it was midnight.

Entry to the Tower of Fangs was dependent on passing a check performed by their security department.

But Orphen didn't feel like they'd actually pass that check, so instead they were hiding in an area right off the main gate. When they looked up to the sky, it was nothing but walls.

The silence, forged as the three of them stared skyward, was suddenly shattered when one of them spoke.

"Okay, well, I get the gist of the situation," Claiomh murmured, Leki sitting on her chest.

Orphen listened to her, squinting suspiciously. "Do you...?"

"Yes, I do."

Both he and the blonde-haired girl looked at each other, eyes grave.

"Majic stole that book from Childman's house, I broke my head fighting my doppelganger, and Tish was sent to the hospital. We tried to chase who did it, but they ended up shooting first. As a result, we took them out. I got all of that correct, right?"

"..."

Orphen took a moment to repeat it all in his head, going down the list of events that had led them here, to this very moment. After a second, he figured her outline of things wasn't incorrect, but it also wasn't entirely correct. But to completely sit her down and explain it all was impossible at this point in time.

Too much had happened too quickly.

But...

“Are you really sure you get all of this?” Orphen repeated, his gaze growing sharp. Claiomh looked at him, her own gaze cooling.

“I suppose I do.”

“Uhhh...” Majic called out from his place behind Claiomh.

Orphen called back at him with a straight face, “What is it, my thieving lad?”

“Buuuuut Masterrrr!” Majic said, looking like he was about to cry. He pummeled his fists up and down in the air. “It was just lying there, it wasn’t like I was purposely trying to steal anything—”

Claiomh watched as Majic tried to justify his actions.

“Basically you were a looter at the scene of a fire. You had a chance and you took it.”

Orphen hammed it up, putting his hand on his forehead and sighed.

“Ah, I’m the mentor of a thief...”

“Ahhhhh!” Majic wailed once before quieting down, and then regained his footing before speaking again. “But we didn’t come to do anything bad, really, so why do we have to sneak around like this?”

“Strangely, I don’t think the security department will side with me against Wall Kahlen. They’d probably haul me off somewhere,” Orphen sighed greatly.

“We have to make sure there’s no way they hear about Leticia getting attacked in reports, or by word of mouth. There would be no way to escape Kahlen’s reach if I got caught by the security department on the way in. That’s not fashionable at all, no sir.”

“But still—” Claiomh started, voice returning to seriousness.

Orphen met her gaze, then looked in another direction— this time, they both looked up at the outer wall of the Tower, and were silent for a little while.

He mused, anticipating the situation.

“...Now the next question is, how do we get over this wall? That’s what I want to know.”

“Well... It’s not like I can fly,” she replied to him.

“Well, I can jump over that wall.”

“Leki might be able to jump over it?”

“And how is he gonna do that? Are you just gonna pitch him, a tiny little black dog, across the wall, like a softball? While we sit here, fighting the mosquitoes?”

“Then what do you propose we do?” She snapped back at him.

Hearing her question, Orphen breathed out slowly, then lifted the silver pendant off his chest so she could see it.

“Just who the hell do you think I am? Some two-bit hack? No. Whatever we can’t do with physical power, we use sorcery for the rest. That’s what sorcery is for.”

Hearing that, Claiomh’s expression turned to one that glowed. With no malice whatsoever, she shook a finger at him and said, “In other words, whatever you can’t accomplish with raw strength, you’ll accomplish with violence.”

“Well, it certainly seems like a lot of people I have scores to settle with have been cropping up lately, that’s for sure,” Orphen sighed, pushing away Claiomh’s finger, and exited the copse of trees.

Claiomh and Majic followed.

The security department’s lookout had gained some notoriety among the tower’s sorcery students, with their extremely long midnight strolls masquerading as patrols around the campus.

Meaning, of course, that those students could sneak out at night and effectively not get caught.

Majic followed him out of the copse, dragging his feet, looking depressed as he opened his mouth to speak to Orphen.

“Um, Master...”

“Yes, my thieving little soldier-in-training?”

Majic retreated slightly at his words, making the slightest sound as he stopped in his tracks, shrinking back. But then he continued in an uneasy voice, “When you were talking about using sorcery to go over the wall... If we were to do that, are you sure we wouldn’t either evaporate the moment we got over the wall, or just crash in a ball of flames if we tried to do any of that?”

Orphen spun around and looked at him with a frightened face. “Do you really think with the two of us we’d end up doing something so dangerous like that together?” He asked. “Space Metastasis sorcery doesn’t mean you can just phase through a wall, you know. You don’t go through it. Space Metastasis is a tool, here. You can use it to get high enough to clear the wall, but then you’ll always have to jump over it, regardless. So that’s what I meant by talking about using sorcery, in this case.”

“That’s what your doppelganger did before, right?” Claiomh asked, remembering.

Orphen nodded. “Exactly. You got it. Gravity neutralization like that is far, far easier to control compared to further Space Metastasis, which would be phasing through objects.”

He caught Majic’s arm before continuing, “Even if you were to fail, you’d be getting off light just getting your innards cooked.”

Orphen looked around after making a safe landing over the wall on the grounds of the Tower. Three people hid in the shadows of material that had been piling up there on the grounds.

In the darkness, all he could tell was that they seemed to be on the immediate premises of something man made. He couldn’t hear anyone breathing, or any footsteps around them.

There were only the mosquitoes who fed on humans.

Claiomh, with Leki riding on her head, stood at his side.

Orphen asked her in a whisper, “Can’t Leki’s sorcery get us into the Tower immediately?”

It seemed she was deep in thought, or maybe, he thought, talking to Leki.

Eventually, she shook her head.

“I don’t think so. He’s still a baby, after all. Even when I talk to him, I have to use very simple language. The rest just doesn’t connect in his little brain just as of yet.”

“Good thing I didn’t have any expectations, then, huh?” Orphen said to Majic, looking over his shoulder. “Did anyone bring The Book with them?”

“I did,” Majic answered, pulling a black leatherbound book from under his coat.

“Good to know,” Orphen muttered, looking up at the Tower. Wall’s students shouldn’t have left their posts in the Tower as of yet, for several reasons.

First of which was the fact that if dozens of assassins were to be dispatched, the security department would be sure to notice. It was a violation of their contract with the Union of Lords, which forbade doing any kind of “work” with a large number of sorcerers. Though violations of that contract frequently occurred, at the end of the day, Wall was simply a professor, and had no real power to enforce it, or in this case, not enforce it.

All of the ins and outs of the sorcerers in the Tower were recorded by security, so it would be the same if they were to go out in mass exodus or one by one.

Leticia was attacked in the middle of the afternoon, and assuming they could leave the Tower in the middle of the day, they would also have to burn some of that daylight by gathering all of the other students, and planning the raid that had happened against Leticia. In the end, it would’ve taken too much time. Out of the question. They knew Forte would be watching them, like he watched everyone else. And if one moved out of the Tower even the slightest bit, Forte’s network of dogs would sniff you out real quick.

And if this is the case, they’d use the easiest and quickest way to get their objective achieved. In this case, that would be the way we all just came in — leaving at midnight, when the patrols go long, and no one is really watching...

Which meant that very shortly, Wall and his assassins would be leaving the

Tower.

Right around now, right?

Orphen swallowed his own coppery-tasting spit.

“They can’t have expected I’d show up like this, couldn’t they?”

“Not just you, you know,” Claiomh said. “It’s us that’s shown up, not just you.”

Hearing that, Orphen grinned.

“No, I wasn’t wrong - they’re expecting me to intercept them. But they aren’t expecting you to come along for the ride.”

“Just why did you bring us along, anyway?” Majic asked, astonished and blinking.

Orphen blinked for a moment, then nodded hurriedly.

“That would be why.”

Orphen looked in the distance at the Tower of Fangs, his gaze sharpening.

“Let’s go,” he muttered, and stepped forward into the night.

The Tower at night was silent. There was no danger here. The light was on in the student dorms across the way outside the campus.

The next problem was going to be the security department—

As they walked silently, Orphen’s mind raced. And behind him, Claiomh and Majic were following, even more quietly than he’d expected.

The Tower of Fangs’ security department that was in charge of enforcement was split into two parts: one, with house pets and guard dogs, which were commonly referred to as “towers” and kept a watch on the internal security of the campus, and the second, the gatekeepers, who had far more manpower than the former. The towers had what could be thought of as a chronic issue with having enough people and animals staffed to do their jobs. (And had Orphen kept in touch with Forte, he wouldn’t be having to deal with the risk of getting caught, and instead expecting his arrival instead.) Orphen reflected on this as he wandered through the grounds, keeping to the shadows.

Well, I don't exactly want to borrow trouble here, but still... , he thought.

Thankfully, there wasn't a whole lot of issues with the sheer amount of places for him to hide all over the grounds. Here and there, there were equipment rooms, or rooms with surplus material left mostly unchecked to run rampant all over the campus. Hmph, he thought, dimly remembering what Majic and Claiomh had just said to him.

—Just why did you bring us along, anyway—?

No, that wasn't right, he answered himself vaguely.

The path he was on was dark with the night around him, and no moon hung in the sky. But if he looked closely enough, he might find it. Perhaps it was just light pollution because of the lights of the dorms that were nearby. Orphen glanced away and looked at them.

Claiomh ran without any difficulty or tension in her body. Whenever she got tired of the heavy blade-proof jacket she'd been wearing, she would strip it off and just wear her combat robes that she'd borrowed from Leticia the night before. This time, her hair didn't hang down her back as per usual. Last time she'd done that, when it came time to take off her robes, she found a great deal of hair she'd shed. She wasn't going to have a repeat of that this time, no sir. She pulled her hair back, but because she did so, she couldn't wear her mask, as her hair was in the way.

When he thought about it, Orphen couldn't recall a time he'd ever seen Claiomh scared about anything. Even now, she didn't seem frightened or concerned at all. Perhaps the word "Tower" didn't strike fear into her heart the way it did for others, he thought. With that in mind, Orphen felt a bitter smile slide onto his lips.

Suddenly, he understood why this girl was constantly stuck in noise and turbulence; she was just not scared enough of either to act so they'd stop.

Behind them, Majic trotted along, with a tragic but brave look in his eyes. He wore black robes that Orphen hadn't seen lately. He looked nervous, holding the neck part of his cloak together, as if trying to wring his own throat.

He hadn't said anything when Orphen had told them they were going to break

into the Tower. He had been more than a little surprised when he heard that Leticia had been so seriously wounded that she'd needed hospitalization.

After all of this is over, maybe it's finally time to talk to both of them about everything, Orphen thought, determined. *Though I guess you already know who I am, who Childman was, and that my journey isn't just about debt collection any longer.*

Then—

Orphen stopped in his tracks.

“Ahh!” Claiomh shrieked, crashing into Orphen's back. Majic drew closer until he was by her side, and stopped.

Orphen glanced at her as she gently massaged her nose (which had bumped into his back), and she looked back at him, as did Leki from his place on her head.

And standing in front of the three of them was the Tower of Fangs.

Although the Tower of Fangs was designed as a self-sufficient colony and citadel, once the outer wall was breached, the workings of the inner ground would become completely transparent.

However, there was one last “wall” of sorts that protected the Tower itself.

From the outside, the first floor of the Tower has no real entrance, and no windows - only walls. There was a stone staircase about five meters wide from its widest point in its center. Only from there one could access the entrance on the second floor.

This was common knowledge beyond the walls of the campus.

The truth was that the first floor wasn't even really the first floor, the second floor with the entrance was the first floor. Below that is an underground warehouse, though it resembled a junk heap more than anything else.

Of course, there was a security checkpoint right next to the entrance on the staircase. No matter how one tried to hide, there was no coverage there whatsoever. One would be exposed regardless of where they stood.

On the other hand, it wasn't really possible to look inside of a window to see

inside of the underground warehouse/junkyard that was under the staircase. In other words, there was only one gas lamp that was consistently lit all night, outside of the little lookout window that was hiding within the warehouse.

There wasn't much light outside the checkpoint, and because of that light, it became like a magic mirror.

I don't even know where to look for it because it's so simple-looking and easy to miss, Orphen thought to himself.

He murmured to himself, using sorcery to try to guide the light that was there and shore up his blindspots, but it required the spell itself to stop at the checkpoint to do so.

To be fair, that was generally the fatal drawback to using spoken sorcery in general.

"What's going on?" Claiomh asked in a whisper. Leki nodded along on top of her head.

"This is the only way in and out of the Tower."

"Isn't there an emergency exit?" Majic asked in a soft voice.

Orphen nodded. "Well, whatever happens now, we're going up against people who can jump down from a window at any height and be okay. They're not the type who need emergency exits."

"Well, that makes sense, but..." Majic muttered, after a long blink. "Then, that means that Wall's students wouldn't use a window to escape, then?"

"In order to neutralize gravity, you have to make the spell's incantation reach the ground. If one were to jump down that loudly, the guards would notice."

"But if it were from a lower floor..."

"The first floor is mostly offices and general affairs rooms, and the second floor is one big storage room, more or less. Both of them are strictly locked and heavily equipped with alarms. Because they use security devices that are intentionally very complicated, sorcery isn't really compatible with them. They're not things that can be transformed."

"But they're assassins, right? If they had a key..." Claiomh shrugged.

“An assassin is different from a burglar because assassinations are usually done outdoors. And that’s because if you go into your target’s house, it’s gonna be a lot harder to get out of there if something goes wrong.”

“...”

“But Orphen, they may not be able to get out of the Tower in the middle of the night tonight? Possibly?”

Hearing that, Orphen immediately responded.

“There are only four full-time ‘tower’ guards within the Tower, and they usually are concentrated most heavily around the entrance, because that way they can definitely catch whoever is trying to escape them.”

Then he pointed to the front gate of the Tower, which was connected to the main wall that shielded the Tower itself. “Whereas the gatekeepers have more than one hundred members to their ranks, which they deploy in eight hour shifts in four teams, rotating patrol areas outside the main gate and ramparts. It isn’t impossible for a few people to slip by undetected, but dozens of people will amass when an alarm is pulled, so if they’re found, Wall’s students won’t be able to escape without injury.”

“...! What are you trying to say? That they’d have to kill and then break through the gatekeepers’ ranks in order to actually get out?”

“I mean, the gatekeepers’ opponents are actual assassins in this case,” Orphen said quietly. “And on top of that, it’ll be several dozen of them. I don’t know the exact number since I left the Tower, but I’m pretty sure they don’t have any fewer than ten people on the low end of things. I can’t do this alone. I’m not sure if I can afford to protect you both.”

“Can’t you call one of your classmates from Childman’s classes?” Majic asked, as if expecting his answer.

“If I can, you can bet your ass I’ll be doing so,” Orphen rejoined immediately.

In his head, he ran through his mental list of other Childman students.

Leticia: Even though her wounds had healed considerably, she’d lost a great deal of blood that hadn’t been replenished as of yet. Mentally, she was also still

pretty spooked, enough to where it warranted her continued inpatient status in the hospital. She wouldn't be released anytime soon, he thought.

Forte: Orphen hadn't been able to contact him, at least back in Tefurem. At worst, because he already possibly had been taken out by Wall and his students.

Corgon and Heartia: They'd already been gone for a long time. Enough said.

Comicron and Childman weren't in this world at all anymore. Enough said there, also.

And Azalie—

Just thinking about her depressed Orphen.

But they'd come to an agreement, of sorts. Azalie was at the hospital, on standby, ready to protect Leticia from any possible further incursions from Wall or his students. Mostly in the event that he failed or, more likely, was outwitted completely.

There was no way for her to come back to the Tower with him to help otherwise.

It was out of the question to ask Dortin, Volkan, Pat, or Tiffes to help with this. They just couldn't. They didn't have the power to.

"Well then, what do you think we should do?" Claiomh's frustrated whisper-shout shook Orphen out of his thoughts once more. In her place, Leki pointed to her legs.

"Wait. I have a good idea," she said, answering her own question after a moment of thought.

"Oh?"

She replied with a smile and continued, "Well, I've just asked Leki to do us all a big favor and just blow all of our enemies out of the Tower~≡. Uh... wait. Orphen, why are your hands around my throat?"

"If this is going to be dangerous for Miss Leticia, wouldn't it be better to just be on standby at the hospital to make sure we could protect her from whatever might be coming her way?"

Orphen sighed, answering Majic's question at his own pace. "In order to duck whatever the assassins might be bringing your way, you can't afford to wait. They'll make a raid plan, a plan of attack to take you out. It's absolutely impossible to prevent their attack, and even more impossible to dodge it all if they have an organized plan to go by. The idea is that you need to be faster than your enemy. In addition—"

"...In addition?" Here Claiomh repeated after him, trying to loosen his hand, which was still gently trying to strangle her throat. It was a last resort, like opening your mouth to chew.

Orphen laughed. "Well, I want to try it. I want to see whether or not I can beat them with the power I currently have. After all, I'm—"

He started to say, as he raised his face up to the Tower.

"I want to see if I truly am the Successor of the Razor's Edge," he finished quietly.

Claiomh bit his hand, which made Orphen finally remove it from her throat. In the meantime, Majic watched them as they fussed at each other.

Then Orphen changed the topic in a whisper.

"Anyway, there's no reason for both of you to think about any of this. I'll be the one jumping into all of this. I'll explain the situation and leave it up to you, how about that?"

"Uh, y-yeah, okay," Claiomh replied, surprised.

Orphen jumped under the stone steps and the other two followed.

Now they could no longer escape back into the darkness, the one gas lamp mercilessly showering them with its illumination. There were no shadows to melt back into, there was only the sense of being out in the open.

As he ran up the stone staircase, Orphen thought to himself, *I understand far too much about this situation than I probably should*— The stone staircase had been rubbed to smoothness by hundreds, if not thousands of sorcerers' feet over the past several hundred years. As Orphen continued to ascend, it was like he was jumping to each new step, kicking off of the stones only to fall back

upon them in a steady rhythm.

The Successor of the Razor's Edge, the Steely Successor—

She probably needed someone like that on her side. Someone who had the ability to kill one of the Great Sorcerers, a Successor like him— And that alone should be able to stop her!



Screaming silently, he continued to climb the staircase, until he finally jumped through the door of the little burrow there on the first floor, which was still open.

“Please, be quiet!”

For the moment, a voice warned him. To show that he meant no harm, Orphen raised his hands in the air very slowly.

“I’m Krylancelo from Childman’s classes. I’m sneaking in here because I have an emergency situation on my hands... Hm?”

After he said that, he stopped speaking.

There were two desks and a few lockers there in the warehouse. On the desks, there were scattered papers in bundles that appeared to be documents. The grungy coffeemaker on one of them appeared to still be in use, with a thin film of dark fluid inside of it coating the bottom.

“No one’s here, huh...”

Orphen could hear Majic whisper. When he looked behind himself, there was Majic. Claiomh waited by the entrance.

“That’s what it seems like, yeah,” Orphen agreed, scratching his head.

The warehouse was unmanned. On the wall there was a chart, depicting staff shifts in a series of three along with the date.

Four people should be working tonight.

And the fact that none of them were there meant only one thing.

“Wall and his students are already on the move?” Majic asked. At that moment— “As of right now, it seems. The workers that should be here just left.”

“...!”

The walls of the warehouse started to vibrate, and the whole building began to creak and shake violently. Dust and sand started to fall from the ceiling, and the sound of glass shattering could be heard.

Outside the window, the gas light fell, and darkness bled into the air as the

bulb burst, hitting the ground.

Instantly, they were plunged into night.

The warehouse is being compressed?!

“Orphen!”

Claiomh.

He replied to her voice reflexively.

“Stay out!”

He waved a hand and started to knit together a spell towards the ceiling, going towards where he’d heard her voice.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

At that moment, a whirlpool of heat waves and light particles accompanied the pure light that shot down from the ceiling. Shockwaves raged through the room, making everyone’s ears ring with the sound that accompanied them.

But...

There was no response.

Fuck. I missed.

Orphen clicked his tongue in frustration, jumping out of the hole that had been worn into the wall from his spell.

“Demon Sword of Puanuk, I call thee!” A voice resounded in response. A thermal wave shot from that same hole, as if the spell from earlier were making another appearance.

Then the warehouse exploded.

He couldn’t remember where and how he managed to survive. Orphen threw himself out the window against the dramatic backdrop of pure flame which had been chasing him.

Behind him, the warehouse, now surrounded by a crater, burned.

“Majic! Claiomh!” Orphen rolled to the ground, shouting their names.

But when he looked around, he couldn’t find where the fire was burning the

brightest.

“Fuck.”

He tried to knit together a spell to extinguish the flames.

As he rose from the ground, he turned and saw the checkpoint area.

Then he saw the man.

The man was hanging onto the burning checkpoint by his hands, looking down at him.

“Hydrant!” Orphen shouted at the man.

Hydrant looked at him and smiled.

No, he was laughing.

Hydrant wore his usual mask, and held a longsword in his right hand. He wore the Tower’s standard battle robes.

He opened his mouth slowly, and even more slowly, the grotesque scars that covered one half of his face, left from when he was burned long ago, were exposed as the firelight slid over them, almost like a caress.

“You’re a flashy bastard, you know that, Krylancelo?”

“I don’t particularly care what you think, you know...” Orphen laughed sarcastically, holding his stance.

“Does the security department know about this fire, you think?”

“Maybe they do. Maybe they don’t,” Orphen chuckled, and Hydrant shrugged in response. The fire exploded around them, making it a little hard to hear.

But you could still clearly hear them if you focused hard enough.

“But you know who’s really in trouble here? Wall Kahlen, not me. He reports to the Chief of Ops. In the end, I’m just a former student. Wall would make a fatal mistake thinking that I will give him anything more than my basic courtesy, as is my duty. If I can kill you, that’s enough for me,” Orphen shouted at him.

“You’re the one who hurt Tish, aren’t you?!”

He jumped backwards, managing to evade the arc of Hydrant’s swinging

longsword, which Hydrant flung down after he landed on the ground.

Orphen held out his left hand.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

“I call thee, Mirror of Tamankama!”

The bulging, swelling, exploding shockwave created from Orphen’s spell crashed right into Hydrant’s barrier.

Regardless, Orphen jumped backwards once more. He followed the outer wall of the Tower’s grounds, moving further away from the entrance with each step.

Seems like this guy does not give one single damn about this whole situation, Orphen thought to himself.

Orphen judged the situation calmly, and as he did, he looked up at the Tower.

None of the internal guards came to see what was going on. If they’re already dead because of Wall and his brats, then they started acting much faster than I initially estimated...

He took a deep breath and shouted the next spell.

“I brandish thee, Blade of Demons!”

The blade fell into his outstretched right hand. In his left hand, he began to knit together another composition.

“I dash across thee, Snowcapped Mountain!”

With that, gravity was neutralized. For a moment, Orphen’s body was free of all of its weight.

Bam!

He kicked off the ground in a dramatic jump upward. Air currents swirled around his ears, and he could hear strange sounds.

He jumped, and a half a second later, found himself jumping into a second-floor window of the Tower.

“Gooooo!”

As Orphen shouted, he hit the barrier surrounding the window with the sword

he held in his right hand, going hard towards the window.

Then the sword disappeared, having achieved its goal.

He rolled into the room, covering his face with his arms.

As soon as he rolled to a stop, he stood and tried to get his bearings. Orphen walked away from the window and its shattered glass (and all of its pieces scattered in the carpet where he landed). He walked to the center of the room before muttering, “I call upon thee, Tiny Spirits.”

As soon as the spell left his lips, tiny white lights filled the room, and around his shoulders.

“Here... or...” Orphen muttered to himself, hanging his head.

He’d ended up jumping into a training room for gymnastics on the third floor. It was a place he knew well...

And from behind him, a voice— “Do you plan to settle your score here?”

He looked behind him, and saw Hydrant leaning on the broken window. He had already stepped into the room, his longsword slung comfortably over his shoulder.

The gym was spacious, with only a few stools scattered around the room and no other equipment. All weapons, including any wooden practice weapons, would be stored in the first floor warehouse. The floor of the gym was hardwood, and the walls were wood, as well. It’s different than the linoleum-lined hallway, which didn’t have actual flooring itself so much as it had pieces of a soft synthetic board all over the floor.

Hydrant sat down by the window and said, “Is this nostalgic, Krylancelo?”

“Yeah,” Orphen admitted. The light in the room increased a bit as the will-o-wisp flames moved closer towards the ceiling. Usually, this would shorten the life of those flames, but because of the room’s size, Orphen felt that that was an acceptable trade off. He needed to be able to see what was going on in there, after all.

Hydrant approached him, not meeting his gaze from about ten meters away. At that distance, there wasn’t enough time to fight properly. Sorcery made this

distance somewhat more manageable, with providing a way to see what his opponent was going to do, and would buy slightly more time to be able to reflexively knit another spell to defend himself with.

Hydrant stroked his own left cheek, even though it technically wasn't really there at all, with his left hand.

"Have you ever thought about this wound?"

"I can't really say," Orphen said, somewhat sadly. His response seemed to make Hydrant angry, even for the shortest moment. However, the expression disappeared as fast as it came, and soon Hydrant was back to being calm and unruffled.

"This scar has enfolded every moment of my life for the last five years."

"Sorry 'bout that," Orphen said, and as he did, he put his hand inside his jacket, and pulled out a dagger that had been sewn into a sheath inside of the jacket itself.

In the cold light of the room, the blade did not shine. While staring at its sharp edge, he added, "But only because it's incredibly boring to think about."

But Hydrant ignored him, and continued to speak.

"I don't particularly care about the book that Wall Kahlen is searching for, as long as I can take my revenge on you. I don't care. I really don't care! As long as I can return the favor for this scar you gave me five years ago at the capital."

"Return what you borrowed, then. And tell someone who gives a damn." With a sigh, Orphen, dropped his hand with the blade of his dagger pointing straight down.

It stayed that way as he spoke.

"I'll tell you something that will make you happy, though."

With that, Hydrant rushed at him— "Just like my wound, your words annoyed me just as much!"

Clang!

With a loud sound, metal on metal, their blades met and sparks flew.

Orphen shouted as the sword, which had been swung down casually, met his knife, which he was holding with both hands.

“I have to return the favor you did for Tish, taking her finger!”



“Orphen! Majic!”

The shockwave from Orphen’s spell pushed her back from the entrance, and Claiomh screamed as flames tore the warehouse apart.

The other two boys disappeared.

The sorcery part of those flames ripped the roof right off the warehouse.

Claiomh screamed again, and was once again pushed away from the entrance.

“Orphen!”

But there was no reply. The roar of the flames, the sound of the air expanding out of the warehouse, the sound of something falling and breaking, the sound of glass shattering blocked all of that out.

She looked into the flames, and saw— She squinted, and managed to see two humanoid-shaped figures in the fire.

“Leki!” She screamed, begging the baby Deep Dragon on top of her head. She embraced him in her arms tightly, and continued to speak.

“Please, do something! Please help them! Anything, anything will help, so please—”

—-!

There was no sound, and nothing happened, but— Claiomh was intuitive enough to know that something had happened, that Leki had indeed done something at her behest.

The baby dragon had stuck out his neck and sniffed the air lightly, without any issues from the smoke or flames. Claiomh noticed something had changed, and glanced throughout the warehouse. When she moved her line of sight, the shadow-like thing in the room had disappeared.

“Yay! You did it!” She cheered, and gently kissed the baby dragon’s nose.

Of course, the figure’s disappearance might have been because they went deeper into the heart of the flames. It might not have even been a figure at all. But Claiomh had the unshakable feeling that whatever Leki had done had worked.

And— “Disappear,” she whispered, and suddenly, all sound within the room disappeared, along with the light and heat of the flames.

The room was back to normal (aside from the damaged walls and ceiling), and it was as if the fire had been a lie.

“Leki? Was that you? Probably not, right?”

In the sudden darkness that wrapped around them both, Claiomh was sweating but felt ice cold. Gradually, her eyes readjusted to the darkness, and as they did, a humanoid figure appeared within it.

Then it moved slightly.

“Illuminate,” came a whisper, and a light bulb of sorts appeared next to the figure. Exposed in the white light from the bulb, the figure was no longer veiled in darkness.

A young man stood alone there in the warehouse, and stared at her with cold eyes.

Although Claiomh was young, the man appeared to be only a few years older than her, she thought vaguely. He looked to be about Orphen’s age.

A skull ring, like a toy, adorned the man’s right hand.

He had black hair, and beneath his black jacket, he had a high-necked undershirt. He was taller than her, and quite handsome. He seemed to be quite suspiciously quiet.

“Milan Tram, doing something so obvious as this... Just what the hell are you thinking?” the man murmured to himself.

Then he turned his face, as if he realized he wasn’t alone. His cold gaze was dyed with curiosity.

“Right, miss?” He paused for a moment. “I wonder what he’s thinking.”

She slowly tried to recede into the darkness of the room, but he seemed to be approaching her at roughly the same speed.

“Who are you?” she asked him as he walked silently towards her. Then— “My name is Vimbi Stottahl. I had another name once, but it was quite literally tormented out of me about two years ago.”

What...?

The voice popped into her head without any warning. It did not seem to resemble the man in front of her.

Naturally, she dropped her gaze.

And then something clicked.

Is Leki... Is he relaying this man’s voice into my head?

She was quick to notice how Leki’s gaze was meeting Vimbi’s gaze.

One after another, words popped into her head, and then disappeared.

“Once I kill Krylancelo, I’m done with work for the night.”

“There must’ve been three people? Krylancelo, then an idiot named Milan, and then a brat named Majic was there too near the checkpoint.”

“Me and Swain jumped out of the hole in the roof, which was most likely the work of Milan. I heard his spell, the oaf, even if the security department did not. Interesting considering it’s hard to get out of here without making a huge fuss. If I were alone...”

“Truly strange. There had to be three people. Where did Majic disappear to? Swain as well. Fuck, I can’t play with what’s left—”

“I’m sorry, who’s a what here?” Claiomh shrieked at him furiously. She clicked her tongue at the man, Vimbi, whose expression changed into something intensely cautious.

The next words that jumped into her head were short.

“Excuse me? I’ll kill you!”

Kill the unknown, that's how many people responded to things they weren't familiar with.

Humans really do short-circuit at the drop of a hat, she thought. She lifted her left arm to shield her face to protect herself from Vimbi's unfortunate habit of waving his right hand around, though she was aware it would have little effect.

She could hear Vimbi shouting.

"Dissolve!"

No thanks!

She had no time to prepare to die.

Then came a small popping sound, like a small explosion. At the same time, Claiomh's arm slipped through something, and hit Vimbi right in the face.

And then there was screaming.

"AAAAAAHHHHH!"

Vimbi crouched in place, holding his right hand, which was bloody. Leki struck back and used some sort of sorcery faster than Vimbi could knit a spell together.

Claiomh had a bad feeling about this, and softened her glare at him. Vimbi's right wrist was now but a stump, torn apart as if his left hand itself had been blown away.

...Was it blown off?

Then she suddenly stopped thinking.

Speaking of which, something had flown into her face...

Whatever it was, it was still stuck in her eyebrows. Something that was like an adhesive, soft.

She tried to pinch and peel it off while it was still moist...

And then the first thing she saw was a bloody skull.

"Oh no. Oh nononononono—-?!"

After staring at it unblinkingly, she threw it and screamed. She fell on her butt

still screaming, and pointed her finger at the still-squatting Vimbi.

“What the hell just happened?! Why did your fingers come flying at me?!”

But of course, he didn’t reply.

“You... bitch...” he coughed, his anger obvious in his voice, and it made his eyes shimmer.

“Heal...!”

The same second she whispered it, the severed part of his hand stopped bleeding, and wrapped itself in new flesh.

Then it was as if nothing had happened at all.

He stood quickly and looked down at her.

“A Deep Dragon, huh... But it’s all over now, so how—”

“What’s over?” she asked him, her butt still on the ground, still moving backward slightly.

“Try something again. Something weird. And maybe I’ll forgive you for blowing off my fucking hand,” Vimbi said with a dangerous grin. He continued, “Tell me how you did that.”

“How I did that?” While answering, Claiomh tried to have Leki look in front of them.

“...Huh?”

She looked down at her empty hands and groaned.

“Leki, where did you go?”

“I wonder,” Vimbi replied to her.

Claiomh was horrified and remembered the last few moments. She’d screamed and tossed the flesh and bone that had hit her hands— “Did I... Did I just throw Leki away from me?!”

Even as she looked around hurriedly, she couldn’t find the baby pseudo-dog anywhere.

“Die.”

“AAAAAHHH?!”

She managed to stand from her place on her knees despite Vimbi’s spell.
And then she ran away from the fire.

This isn’t funny anymore!

She ran in the darkness, and while she (amazingly) managed to not to fall into a ditch someone had just dug in the middle of the road, she still got lost. She could see the silhouette of the Tower of Fangs, which rose black in the emptiness of the night around her, but it made her perception of distance worse as a result.

She guessed she was basically retracing her steps and going backwards towards all of the shadows that she, Majic, and Orphen had hidden in on the way to the Tower.

Stupid Orphen, saying that as soon as we caused a fuss, the security guards would be all over us. No one’s coming after me!

If they did come and find her, most likely they would book her on charges of trespassing, which would probably be preferable to whatever they’d do if they found Orphen.

That Vimbi guy really looked like he was about ready to kill me, she thought to herself in a mental grumble, as she started to look for something that could be used as a weapon and would be small enough to fit into her pocket.

She just couldn’t seem to make herself return to where she just had been.

Please, I’m so weak, just let me find something so I can use it to protect myself...

In the end, she couldn’t find anything small enough to put into her pocket.

I swear to god, at times like this, Orphen and Majic are utterly useless creatures!



“Ahhhhhh?!”

A scream that could dye one’s vision a sparkling crimson rang out in the air.

It was a scream that felt like your whole world was being devoured by fire.

And it hurt. Of course it hurt. At that point, it seemed that all sorts of lies were being revealed for what they were. Even if he realized it was out of place, Majic felt himself rattling on in his own head. All of it was lies, and the final salvation in life was death itself.

He could see heaven.

His body grew heavier and heavier as he floated towards sleep.

It wasn't hard.

Come on, go ahead.

Go to sleep.

It's okay.

It's fine.

You're allowed.

No! Not you!

He screamed in his own head as he flapped his cloak to put the fire out.

This is no joke, this is so hot, it hurts so much, I don't know what's around me, I can't breathe, I can't stand, I can't open my eyes— Majic and his body were completely confused, and he rampaged around, trying desperately to put out the burst of fire that had enveloped his body in the warehouse.

Even so, that might have been a phantom feeling. He wasn't even sure if he was able to move anymore at all— I don't know why I didn't know that! It's my body, I should know that, why— He complained mentally to his senses, and managed to pump saliva to his aching throat. But his tongue was so dry, there wasn't a whole lot that trickled back into his throat.

Well, guess I'm fucked. I'm really going to die. Even though my mom was supposed to come visit me on my birthday this year, there's no way I'll be able to return to the city to receive her...

...

At some point, while the pain didn't exactly go away, Majic could no longer

feel its heat. Instead, it felt as if a cool breeze had wrapped itself around his body, stroking him gently.

But if I go back to my house so I can hang with my mom, I'm supposed to enroll in classes for the Tower... How many years will this take, I wonder? Do I get summer vacation? Why did I think I wanted to enroll in the Tower in the first place, anyway?

His kneecaps were so heavy, and stuck to the floor. He no longer had the power to stand up. The dark flame that was burning even though his eyes were closed, leaked red flames through the gaps in his eyelids.

As if he were just sitting alone in the dark— ...Huh?

Majic raised his head, noticing something. When he opened his eyes, they tingled.

He was sitting alone in the dark, there was no “as if” about it.

“...Where... Am I...?”

He looked around restlessly, then looked down at the palm of his hand, then decided with a nod.

He closed his eyes again, and concentrated, thinking of his surroundings, thinking of the whole world around him.

And quietly, he knitted his composition.

“I call upon thee... Tiny Spirits,”

The sound of a soft breeze blew through the room, and a small white flame burst into his palm, adapting itself quickly to catch water from his hand. The little fireball flew up to the ceiling.

Light illuminated the area.

“...Company?” Majic asked, looking around the new scene the will-o-wisps had created.

It was almost that kind of atmosphere; personal desks arranged regularly throughout the room. However, on those desks, papers and various documents were scattered and piled up here and there. Attendance desks and other things

stuck on whiteboards were standing here and there but it wasn't clear what the meaning of those were as they had some staff names attached to them. On one of those boards there was a circle and a cross.

In the back of the room, there was a large desk, and beside it, a large fireproof safe. The cabinet attached to the desk was packed with large, thick paper bundles, already starting to bulge and protrude from the desk itself.

Finally, there was an empty vase perched at the corner of a sink.

Majic still wasn't entirely sure where he was, but looking around, it came to him.

"Right... I was swallowed by that fire, until Leki moved me somewhere. He moved me..." He muttered, rephrasing it to himself.

"No, there's a better way to say it. He transported me? No. No I was right the first time, he moved me."

"Metastasis?"

"Yeah, that's it," He answered himself. "That's Master's 18th thing. Compared to the Dragons' space metastasis sorcery, you could say that Master's space metastasis sorcery is more of something that's closer to a partial state than a full one..."

Going so far as to mutter that, he continued to think aloud.

Then he went bone white, all of the color and blood draining from his face as he realized something.

"Who... Who is...?" He turned around, asking the room aloud. The interior of the room was quite bright now, lit by thousands of will-o-wisps.

He turned, and saw a small, dark-headed figure.

He remembered that figure being shown off in their costume, and Majic smiled, shouting, "Why hello there, adorable Clai Mask Number Two. I suppose you were transferred along with me."

In a soft voice, the assassins muttered amongst themselves. Majic felt like crying, and he shouted, agonized, "Nooo..."

“When the checkpoint exploded, I jumped in. Your precious teacher seemed to have escaped sooner than we’d hoped. Perhaps you misidentified me as Krylancelo and transferred me, too.”

“Noooo, that little creature! That tiny beast!” Majic shrieked, but his opponent was utterly unsympathetic to his gnashing of teeth.

As they approached, Majic quickly pointed his finger.

“Well, it matters not. Krylancelo will hand over what we want to Milan. Sword.”

The last word was like a spell.

After a few long moments of thought, Majic also unleashed the spell he’d just knitted together.

“I spin thee thus, Halo Armor!”

Immediately, a somewhat distorted barrier of light caught a lightwave that the assassin had unleashed, heading right towards him. As the different bubbles of air rubbed against each other and caught fire, Majic turned around and went to the exit of the room.

We have to rejoin Master!

The exploding roar behind him disappeared. Despite the signs that the assassin was in pain, Majic turned around, left the room, and didn’t look back.

Ignoring the nagging feeling that he was probably being chased, the next thing that Majic heard was a gentle voice.

“Are you sure it’s okay to run away from all of that?”

“...?”

He felt something disgusting, a sickening feeling starting to wash over him, and stopped in his tracks.

Then he looked behind him.

The assassin continued to follow him with a relaxed, generous attitude, while raising something black and square in their hands.

“You dropped it in the warehouse. Would you mind if I took it?”

Majic's eyes widened. "That's—"

He patted himself down. The book, which had been under his shirt, was definitely gone.

"You...!"

This time he turned fully towards the assassin, muttering furiously.

The assassin responded to him, still holding the book without showing his other hand.

"When we passed each other, I thought one of you had the book with you. But I was wrong, it wasn't Krylancelo. It was you who carried it. A boy."

"Master entrusted it to me!" Majic took a breath and continued, "My teacher gave it to me, trusted me with it, and ordered me to carry it with us today."

The assassin responded once more, still calmly holding the book.

"You shouldn't have stopped, boy. You're not going to get this book back. Unless... you plan on fighting me for it?"

"I release thee—"

Majic didn't bother answering him, instead focusing his energies on knitting more sorcery together with as much power and mana as he could muster. He prepared it all carefully and shot it with all of his power.

"—Sword of Light!"

He screamed.

And in that moment— What?!

Majic felt his body as if it had been pushed from behind. But it was an illusion. He hadn't been physically pushed or touched— This feeling... It's the same as before!

Remembering, he was pushed further. Something popped into his head, and then everything was clear to him at that moment— Zap!

An intense wave of light and heat, incredibly concentrated, stretched from his palm to the assassin. Like a giant rushing while stepping on a ladder, the wave hit the line of desks, scattering them.

He was likely to be swayed by the power he used, but if he made a mistake, or caused a reaction that was even close to 1% of what he was using, his body itself would have been blown away, vaporized into its base components.

So his target was narrowed to his opponent's body.

When the photothermal wave he unleashed reached the target's position, it converged in a spiral, concentrating all of its destructive power into one single point.

Burn it, trash it, erase it from the continent— Do anything to make sure that that book doesn't go with the target. You can't betray Master's trust!

Light poured in like a curse.

Master is going to the Kimluck Church next. I don't want to hinder him, but I don't want to be left behind like some burden!

Thinking that, Majic became even more enthusiastic about his spell, remembering the more he pushed the power outward with each word, the harder it would hit the target.

Really...

Then he remembered something.

Master told him. It wasn't like someone had just discovered sorcery one day and just decided to use it on a whim. No, Master said, it was because they had to.

As he exhaled his last breath, the effect of the spell had been interrupted. In a completely destroyed room with no desks, Majic sat down, fatigue heavy on his shoulders as he looked at his hands.

He was sweating and his skin felt like it was crawling all over his body.

"I didn't... I didn't burn myself. I was able to control it this time."

"Yeah, but you didn't hit your target."

"...!"

There before him, the assassin stood completely intact, with the book under his arm, in the exact pose as before.

He raised his arm.

“Sword.”

In an instant, the flash from the spell reached Majic and then exploded.

“I shouldn’t have shown you any mercy. I should have just killed you like the annoying little pest you are a long time ago. Even so, it was good to allow myself time for this mana to build up. Because now I can get out of here without having to worry about it hitting me.”

The assassin looked dispassionately at the ruins around them, caused by Majic’s photothermal energy wave. The desks were swirled together, melting.

“Well, good. Once you’re dead, any talents of yours can become cute.”

“But you didn’t hit me.”

“What?!”

The assassin was making the same face that Majic had just made minutes ago. Although it was a bit unclear due to the fact that the assassin was wearing a mask, and was buried in two or three meters’ worth of melted desks.

But his voice had a clear, startled color to it. Majic felt satisfaction just hearing how devastated that man was.

“I didn’t think I could do it.”

“Is this... S-Space metastasis sorcery?!” The assassin panted, starting to retreat. “That’s one of Childman’s most protected secrets. How the hell did this brat—” He shook his head, trying to reconcile that in his head with a plaintive moan.

“To be fair,” he added after a moment, “Krylancelo was the best user of that technique. But I still can’t believe this...”

“Oh... But he didn’t exactly teach me this himself,” Majic said, trying to get up. But his body could not, did not move.

Perhaps because he’d been constantly using all of the mana he could get his hands on, he was exhausted, his body was exhausted and pushed past its limits.

He couldn’t even move one single finger.

“Wh-What?” Majic said in shock, the only part of his body able to move appearing to be his vocal cords. His hazy view showed a target standing ready.

“Doesn’t seem like you can do it again, son,” the assassin said, voice soft.
“Sword—”

“Light.”

A new voice cut in from the side. It felt like a hallucination.

Blam!

A short sound as a tree hit the rocks outside, and the flashing glow which hit the assassin’s face sideways.

“Wha—?!”

While Majic was looking into his eyes, the light swelled again a bit, and this time it was shot at the assassin’s flank.

Then again, on his face.

“AAAAHHHHHH?!”

The assassin fell on the spot, holding the burning mask to his face and screaming.

Who was that, just now? It wasn’t... Master?

The assassin had just been hit with a very intense wave of light; the composition of which was pretty similar to what Orphen used.

But all spells were individual and thus, very different at their cores.

Whoever had made that spell was more than capable, it seemed. Knitting together three different spells for such an intense effect... Majic doubted even Orphen could do that with any sort of ease.

He looked around fearfully and found that the door to the room was open.

There stood a man. And passing his shoulders stood four other sorcerers.

At a glance, it appeared the man was commanding the other four. He was tall with a stern but quiet expression on his face. His hair was long and tied back with a bit of ribbon. Although his body was wrapped in a rather heavy cloak, he

looked like he was quite the sorcerer; he was solid, at least in appearance, a sorcerer several steps above his own master.

And— “WHOOOOOA!”

Majic’s thoughts were interrupted by the assassin, who was now lying on the floor. He moved his neck and stared at Majic. The cheeks of his mask were badly ripped and bleeding, and the wound on his flank was just as bad, if not worse. As soon as the assassin stood, the four sorcerers drew closer after breaking open another exit through the wall for Majic.

“Wai—”

In an attempt to chase the assassin, Majic tried to stand. He didn’t lift his arms, though.

The four sorcerers were far more obviously agile than he was at this point, and they jumped into an immediate pursuit of the assassin, who had made his way out of the room.

“Stop! Now!”

He was stopped by the tall man by the door.

Everyone stopped moving immediately in the room and looked at the man.

And then the man quietly spoke.

“That’s Swain, one of Wall’s students. If we screw up our pursuit of him, it’s gonna cost us a lot of money. We don’t necessarily have the duty nor the honor of having him killed in the line of duty. Let’s leave him to Krylancelo, and that should be enough.”

And then the man turned around to face Majic.

“In addition, detention of outsiders comes first.”

Upon hearing that, Majic replied with a jerk, “Oh... Wait. Wait a second, I’m not an outsider! I was planning on enrolling in the Tower for courses.”

“I already know that,” the man said calmly, but did not instruct the other four sorcerers or bely his orders. He continued with a bland expression, “Because you will become *my* student.”



Five years ago, in the royal city of Mebrenst— Krylancelo looked up. Despite being summoned by the Apostles, in the end, he was just a student here to take a test, and it didn't mean that he was able to stay in with royals. The travel expense deductions he could make were extremely limited, so he ended up in a small inn with a classroom.

"Excuse me?" he asked, closing a zipper of his old duffle bag.

A boy stood alone in the doorway of the room.

He was not much different than Krylancelo himself.

They were both about the same age (fifteen years old), both wearing black robes, both bearing the dragon crest of the Tower.

Aside from that, their positions were assuredly quite different. There was Krylancelo, who specialized in assassination techniques, then there was Milan Tram, aka Hydrant, who had already been assigned to the Executive Council at a young age.

He remembered that that Hydrant was given that nickname at that time, probably for a simple reason. Fire hydrants were everywhere, were they not? But where was Milan Tram? He was a rarity. There weren't many like him. Contrary to the command of the Executive Council's Chief Executive Officer, he came to the capital before Krylancelo did.

"That's why I'm saying that, without you, we're gonna have some serious issues. The elders—"

"What about me?" Krylancelo asked him, and Hydrant sighed deeply.

"If you're asking me to rephrase what I was saying, fine. Okay." He brushed back his hair, and continued. "I have to be there. There's one sorcerer that can kill The Chaos Witch that's in the Tower at any time. I have to help prevent that."

Even after rephrasing it, what he said still wasn't immediately understandable.

Then Orphen snapped back to the present. Before he felt that he could

understand what was happening, that he was bursting with something.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

As he shouted the spell, the wooden floor burned from his feet to where Hydrant was standing. White light and heat followed as shockwaves.

The sound of a wet rag hitting a wall resounds through the room, and air burst out, hitting a barrier.

As the thermal shockwave hit the barrier, Hydrant stepped slightly to the left, completely unharmed. Away from the trajectory of the shockwaves, he quickly flipped his sword to its sharp end.

“Come forth, Demonic Sword of Puanuk!”

There was a flash of light before their eyes.

The heatwave from Hydrant’s spell crawled along the floor, flying towards Krylancelo, who was hiding behind the barrier he’d just helped to create.

Hydrant’s brand of sorcery was the kind that followed you, changing trajectory as needed in the aftermath of a photothermal wave.

“I string thee thus, Glass Hail!”

Hydrant’s body floated in the air for a moment, trapped in the spell’s construction, and then was blown across the room against the wall.

Blam!

His body hit the wall with a meaty thud.

Seeing that, Orphen crept across the floor. His stance was slightly wider, slightly more open, as he glared at Hydrant who was right in front of him. He raised his right hand, and shouted with all his might as he moved his left hand to his right shoulder, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

Light swelled, a band of it converging on the target like a raging river engulfing a rock.

—*There’s a counter-current?!*

The next moment, the world exploded around Orphen.

“...!”

He screamed silently, and escaped the enveloping flames.

The heat wave wasn't hot enough to burn away his clothes or skin, but just enough to trap him in one space.

He managed to get away partially from that space, turning away from Hydrant, who was staring at him as if he'd anticipated how Orphen was going to react.

He raised his right hand and it looked as if he were throwing the spell at Orphen.

Orphen groaned and very gently stood up.

“So you're telling me that once you hit the wall you still were able to shoot off more spells at me?”

“When it comes to sorcery, mine is just stronger than yours. Did you forget?” Hydrant smiled sweetly, and he continued, “Remember that Childman's classes and his students aren't the strongest in the Tower.”

“That's true,” Orphen nodded lightly in agreement.

Then he threw the knife he had in his hand at Hydrant.

“—?!”

Watching Hydrant panic, rush, squirm, and dodge the knife spurred Orphen on to get closer, his fist outstretched and waiting to make contact.

“You dare underestimate me?!”

Hydrant was going to go further, taunt Orphen further, ask him if he saw his chance to come after him?

Instead he swore a little, managing to hold off Orphen's fist, and tried to turn around at the same time.

But it was a feint.

I got him! , Orphen muttered triumphantly in his head.

“I dance through thee, Corridors of Heaven!”

“—What?!” Hydrant’s voice over his shoulder disappears for a moment— Orphen quickly used space metastasis sorcery to move, changing the direction his body was facing so that he was inverted to Hydrant.

At that moment, he drove his fist into an astonished Hydrant’s flank.

“In close combat, the strength of your sorcery isn’t very relevant. Your sorcery can be the strongest in the world, or it can be torn to shreds and barely hanging on. It won’t matter much either way. It’s as if you’d be setting off a firecracker in someone’s ear to make them pass out. That’s about how useful it is.”

“This is...!” Hydrant groaned, stiff but immovable in anger.

Orphen continued to speak in a low mutter, his head against Hydrant’s chest and his fist in the other boy’s flank.

“It’s true we stopped moving really quick, the two of us. But if we were able to get around with just striking each other, we would have to fight back against each other immediately.”

He lightly pressed against Hydrant’s chest with his head, making Hydrant reflexively push back slightly.

Without missing that opportunity, Orphen stretched his muscles until it felt like they’d burst, and then thrust both fists at Hydrant.

He released his counter move from a close range in response to the opponent’s sudden movement.

This was one of the strengths of Martial Master Childman.

Just then came the sound of Orphen kicking the floor. Hydrant fell backwards while Orphen rushed up and tried to strike his heel against his fallen opponent’s chest, but was overtaken. He rotated his body, got up with that momentum, and Hydrant shouted— “I summon thee, Demonic Sword of Pua—”

“Too late!”

With a zap, Orphen threw his right hand towards Hydrant, who was about to release his spell. His piercing hand, not his fist, had fingers so strong and close that his opponent could feel his exhaled breaths— Orphen pierced the flesh of Hydrant’s face.

“Ughhhhh!” Hydrant screamed— Of course, there was no way the human finger could penetrate a skull. Instead, Orphen stuck his finger in holes that had been opened previously. His thumb spanned the space from palate to throat, and the index finger between his eyelids...

“AAAAAAAHHHHHH!”

Orphen quietly said to Hydrant, who was shouting in fear and pain, “It’s the same as that time before, right?”

His gaze was lurid as he continued, “I’ll give you a lecture just like I did that time. There are two types of injuries, simple and fatal.”

As he spoke, his index finger slightly helped Hydrant’s body shudder and shake. Bloody tears spilled from his eyelids, as Orphen’s fingers plunged in further to the second joint.

“One type is the kind that can stop all life activities in one movement. The other is the type of wound that can never be sutured.”

“You little bitch—” Hydrant tried to say but he had a finger in his mouth, and it was difficult for him to speak past moans of pain.

Orphen ignored it.

His voice was loud as he shouted, “Let’s do something fun. Let’s go ahead and open up your face like that time before, where I basically ripped off half your face.”

“St...op...”

“The cultists and Tish asked you to stop, and you didn’t. So why should I?” Orphen said, and in his passion, pulled his finger to tear off Hydrant’s eyelids— For a moment, he felt something warm in his thumb as he helped to seal off Hydrant’s mana.

“Wha—?!”

Then Orphen suddenly retracted his thumb and index finger. He held his right hand still on Hydrant’s chest, and watched him carefully.

The scent of sour stomach acid hit his nose.

His gastric juices!

Orphen clicked his tongue in annoyance, then yelled a spell to neutralize the acid. Gastric juices were very strong hydrochloric acids, and while a burn wouldn't happen immediately, it still didn't bode well for Hydrant.



In that moment—

With a dull thud, black exploded across his field of vision.

His body struck the floor, face first.

Orphen struggled to get up, violently nauseous.

But his body wouldn't move.

He had a concussion.

Was I... struck with a sword?

That happened while the acid was being neutralized. As if chasing that afterwards, his throat and the inside of his head began to tingle. It had felt like he'd been struck directly in the head.

The flowing blood from the wound stained his face. He could taste it in his mouth as it drenched his tastebuds.

He could see stars on the horizon of his darkening field of vision. But he couldn't reach them, no matter how hard he tried.

"Judging in the moment, Leticia MacCready is better..." he could hear Hydrant wheeze.

"If you miss even one finger, you'll be killed..."

Co...me... on!

Orphen roared at himself in his own head, and managed to rotate his body. Something hard collided with his fingertip, and it unintentionally curled itself into a big letter.

He grabbed it unconsciously, and opened his eyes.

He faced upward, lying on his back, which appeared vulnerable. Hydrant was preparing to swing his sword down on Orphen at that very second.

Hydrant shouted, with a half-bruised smile on his face, half of which had already been obliterated by scar tissue.

"This time I win, Krylancelo!"

At the same time as Hydrant's bellow, Orphen watched the sword swing

down with incredible clarity.

This is... our last match! , Orphen screamed in his head, and thrust the hard object he'd just gripped upwards.

It was the knife that he'd just thrown.

The knife's blade didn't hit the sword, but instead, slid upwards into the air.

With a flash of intuition, before throwing it up, Orphen hit the switch on the switchblade with his thumb.

Shink!

The spring popped, doing its job, and only the blade part of the knife flew up into the air.

Slice!

When the two sounds echoed in rapid succession, silence blanketed the room immediately.

Hydrant looked at the space where his hands should have been, as if amazed.

There were no hands.

There was no longsword.

His hands slipped from his wrists and hit the floor.

"Game... set... match," Orphen muttered slowly, raising himself up off the floor, throwing away his bladeless knife and looking up at an astounded Hydrant.

He realized that at some point he'd had his shoes blown right off his feet.

He was honestly more amazed that he hadn't noticed.

They were probably blown away by one of the spells we used.

They still had to be careful. If they made too much noise, the Security Department would come in and figure out what they'd been doing.

Hm? Speaking of which... , Orphen noticed suspiciously. What happened to the Security Department? Even though the room literally exploded, no alarms sounded?

But it wasn't something he was too seriously worried about at this point, he reassured himself silently, and lifted his left arm to pick up his errant shoe.

"Stupid of you to think we're on the same level, you fucking brat. I'm a sorcerer—"

"I really thought I would have to rely on sorcery—"

With a soft fwump, something (or someone) jumped down behind him.

Vimbi turned around slowly. He glanced over Vimbi's head, not seeing him because it was so dark in the room. There was a tree branch that stuck through one of the walls now, and it was as tall as Vimbi's head.

So he used it to ambush them and jumped down from the branch.

Immediately, he looked behind him and— There stood that girl again.

That girl from before.

Then she moved.

Something hit his temple.

He collapsed. As he fell to the floor, he saw what he'd been struck with.

"...You stuffed your socks full of sand! So you have been in a knock down drag out fight like this before."

She held her sock in her right hand, and looked at him with a fearless expression.

"But that's a woman's brute strength for you, honestly. You won't be able to beat me, young miss!"

"I also think so—" she said, and allowed her left hand to glide out from where it had been at her side. "But I also just finished packing stones into my other sock, so..."

"...Wh... What?"

Unexpectedly she found herself waiting to swing the stone-filled sock up high.

"Well, hopefully this sock won't knock your brains out of your head—"

Konk!

Light flashed and died in his eyes as his consciousness disappeared.

Little did he know it, but that night, Vimbi Stottahl would forget his name for the second time in his life.

Chapter VII: We Won't Make It Until Dawn His footsteps felt heavy.

The smell stuck inside of his nose, maybe his clothes were slightly burnt. The bleeding from the morning had stopped. The sequelae of the concussion in the upper part of his brain still remained, but it wasn't bad enough where he couldn't walk.

He walked down the hall with a feverish look to him. He was slightly out of breath, and while he did realize that; he had no choice but to keep advancing forward.

It was still night outside the window.

The dark night sky was reflected slightly in the windows, as if it were an example for what night looked like, a sample.

It was still cloudy, so there was no starlight, but there was still some slight light still coming down from the sky. The watery light diluted the darkness, and he felt as if he were swimming inside of it...

Suddenly his knees gave out on him.

He was about to fall, but he managed to slide onto his knees instead.

That was when he started to laugh.

Shit—

Orphen cursed himself.

What does being the Great Krylancelo matter if I can't even walk?

Then he carefully, shakily, rose up to his feet, and started walking once more. He wobbled a fair bit, as if he were a newborn colt.

There was a classroom on the fifth floor, and that's where he was heading.

The floor was so wide, that with each step he felt rooted to it, as if he weren't even moving at all.

Strangely, there was no ambush.

And somehow, deep down inside, Orphen had known that there would be no ambush.

That's where... They're waiting for me... he thought, staring at the door of Wall Kahlen's classroom in silence. *Wall Kahlen, the man who brought me to the Tower in the first place.*

In his head, the past started to fade away within the pain.

Everything I discovered as a young sorcerer, even though I was brought up with two assassins, in the end... It's ironic. I just couldn't be an assassin.

At one time in his life, he might have become one.

At one time in his life, he was sure he had no doubt.

Azalie—

If I weren't the person destined to murder you— Or at least, if I didn't even know about any of that— Or even if I—

Orphen knocked on the door before he could think of anything else.

Somehow in the meanwhile he'd arrived at the door to Wall's classroom.

It wasn't locked, nor was it closed over all the way. He wasn't sure if the door was open due to the recoil of the spring as part of the mechanism for the door, or if it was for some other reason.

There was no sound as he slipped in through the door.

Wall's classroom spread itself out in front of Orphen. It wasn't much different than Childman's classroom had been, objectively speaking.

The past eighteen hours had flown by and now he was there in the assassins' room— "You're rather late."

In the dark room, magical light failed. It was one kind of welcoming to be sure.

That and around the room, several assassins had been placed, as if quite literally protecting Wall Kahlen himself.

Orphen answered calmly while entering the room.

"Did you think the assassins were going to make their entrance on the stage

right at some specific time?”

The voice came again. “You poor thing. This is your loss, you know. We just got that item from you and all.”

Behind the window, Wall Kahlen himself spoke.

The assassins were wearing maskless combat uniforms. Wall raised his arm comfortably, holding a small black leatherbound book in his hand.

“Unfortunately for you, Swain has taken your student. Right, Swain...?” The old man said, and gazed into the corner of the classroom.

Orphen allowed his gaze to wander there as well.

Indeed, in the corner of the classroom, there was an immovable black mass rolling. It appeared to be the remains of a person, sticky and dirty.

It seemed like that person was already dead, and Swain and his men didn’t seem to care.

The first guy is the guy who snuck into Tish’s house...? , He managed to judge hazily.

Orphen stiffened his face unconsciously and turned to Wall.

With trained killers to his left and his right, Wall stared back at him. He tilted his head, as if amused.

“Quite honestly, I didn’t expect your student to do that. I didn’t expect that you would take him with you to challenge me. You were always alone... At least, I’d been left wondering on that count for quite some time.”

“...” Orphen did not immediately answer; he was too busy making sure the walls of the room were behind his back. Leaning back against the hard surface, he finally found the words to speak.

“...What was so valuable this time that you had to do things this way?”

“?”

Orphen laughed at Wall, whose expression was so suspicious.

“You see,” he said, “I kind of don’t have time for this right now.”

“...Oh?”

Orphen took a deep breath and continued.

“If you look like a lucky tanuki who isn’t giving back what he borrowed, or a selfish daughter who knows no better, or a young sorcerer who shoots off two or three different little tricks, that’s one thing. But if you’re like you, and go ahead and just do everything the bastard’s way for your own pleasure, hurting whomever you like, how can I say it? It pisses me off,” Orphen spat.

“It makes me despise you with every fiber of my being.”

Wall smiled and flipped through the book with an elegant hand.

“My boy, this book describes the secrets of our world. If the world of the gods exists, then that means the gods’ power must exist. In other words, sorcery.”

With that he tapped the cover of the book and continued, “This book of ancient times is the key to everything: to Jotunheim, to endless mana where one can lead through sorcery!”

The rest of the assassins were silent, and they stared at him along with Wall. Nine people in the room made eighteen eyes, and Orphen was silent a moment in order to digest that. Rather than fighting them he allowed himself a moment to rest, tired as he was.

Finally—

“Ancient words, huh?” Orphen grinned. He lifted his back from the wall of the room, and peeled off his bandana. “Sounds like it would be too hard for me to read for sure.”

“...What?”

At Orphen’s words, Wall felt something, and groaned that response.

Then he finally looked back down at the book.

“Th—”

“What is this, you want to ask me, right?” Orphen laughed intimidatingly at his puzzled teacher. At the same time, he folded his removed bandana and held it firmly. It was just a bandana, smeared with blood and sweat, but it could still

stop a sword at point-blank range if given the chance.

Orphen continued, "Turns out Claiomh's diary is the exact same size, so I might've pulled a switcheroo. It was convincing though, right? Though admittedly if you look up close there are several clues it's fake. Still, I'm glad you bought it."

"You little brat...!" Wall screamed, throwing the book to the floor in rage. As if that was their cue, the assassins around him started to move and unfold themselves around him quickly.

Nine opponents. Looks like I may not win this one, Orphen thought, dropping his hips and hardening his defense stance. He opened his eyes wide.

"Wall Kahlen! Make no mistake, I will kill you."

"Well said!" Wall shouted back at him, or... No, it wasn't, it had been one of the assassins who had said that. Since they all hid their faces they all looked the same, so even minor changes in physique were harder to catalogue. But that was by design.

They were almost entirely indistinguishable from each other.

There should have been some women amongst the assassins there today, but it was hard to tell for sure.

Despite being well-trained and in a group with superior numbers, they still could only take Orphen on two at a time.

That would calculate to four rounds of attacks.

The probability of surviving without any damage was close to or at zero.

In contrast to the assassins who had every part of their body covered by their battle robes, Orphen was at a disadvantage with how parts of his skin peeked out.

He evaluated the opponents before him dispassionately.

The first, he would hit with his fist.

The second, he would use his elbow.

The third, he would use the weapon he had.

Looking at the approaching knife's edge, Orphen was trying to stick out his left arm to block it.

If I pierce the tendon of his left arm, I can disarm him of his knife. The next question is, can I really do that?!

If he could, he still might end up with ultimately fatal wounds, and those would be his end.

But he had to try.

Orphen was determined, and made his choice.

The moment he felt pain, he would have to twist his arm so it would hook the blade to his bone before the opponent would try to remove it, or twisted the knife and tried to initiate other actions.

Everything happened in a moment. Most likely he wouldn't have time to clearly think everything through as it all happened.

He slipped his left arm in front of where the opponent was aiming, anyway.

Go!

Time stopped without any pain.

At that moment, the first opponent had already disappeared from his field of vision, and was too busy blowing across to his left.

A single infantry spear pierced his personal orbit.

"Ah!"

Orphen glanced away, moving his gaze along the spear's handle that ran right across his field of vision.

The spear itself penetrated straight through the assassin's skull from where the door to the room had remained open.

Of course, he would die instantly. And that's what happened after he started to have convulsions from the wound.

"Forte!" Orphen yelled at the man who was quietly standing in the entrance to the room. One could hear the other assassins buzzing amongst each other in this obvious upset.

Forte Puckingham stood in the doorway to the room.

He wore a combat uniform, with medium heavy armor, and two longswords of different sizes had been lowered. He had chains with blades wrapped around the back, and the cloak on the uniform itself would have braided chains for extra protection.

Then Orphen realized something.

Forte's equipment wasn't for a simple sorcerer tussle.

It was the heavier equipment one took to wage war.

If such a physically tall sorcerer like Forte had this much ammunition, the intimidation effect that he would have alone would be very substantial.

Orphen just gaped at him, as if he was amazed.

"Forte," he repeated, "Why?"

But Forte did not answer his question. Instead he turned to look at Wall, and spoke in a light tone.

"Professor Kahlen and his students, I presume."

The tall man unsheathed his swords before continuing, "I have questions about the attack on Leticia MacCready, esteemed senior sorcerer from Childman's classes, and the destruction of many of the Dragon cultists. According to the orders of the Chief Executive Officer of the Executive Council —"

Here he turned to look around the room.

To Orphen it seemed like he had a faint grin on his face as he did so, and continued, "Before this, you violated our rules concerning duels and prohibited private fighting. If you do not cease and desist, you will be destroyed on the spot."

"Forte Puckingham!" Wall screamed, and it bounced off the walls of the classroom. It was as if he'd been surprised by a ghost. "I would not bluff at a time like this. Are you saying this is really at the behest of the Chief Executive Officer? There wouldn't be time for the Executive Council to move before I could—"

“Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong, old man. There was one Executive Council member who had already been on the move.”

“What are you... saying...?” Wall blinked in shock, mouth hanging open in confusion. Looking around, Orphen finally noticed something.

“It was Hydrant!” Orphen gasped.

“Exactly,” Forte nodded. “By the time we had received your message, Krylancelo, our office’s work day had already ended. We couldn’t help it, else we face an elder’s rage for making them write something after the day had already ended. Instead we decided to convene in the security department independently, and wait for Krylancelo to render Hydrant a noncombatant.”

At that point, he pulled out the book from inside of his robes and showed it to everyone in the room.

“Milan Tran had signed off on it, making this a valid operation. You could say it was the necessary bargain we had to make to turn a blind eye to Hydrant’s behavior. Regardless, it looks like he’ll be behaving for now. He has to.”

Forte pointed behind himself in front of Wall to the other security officers ready to carry out his orders, whose mouth was still hanging open in obvious shock.

“Well then, all of the other guards have deployed to key points to the rest of the campus. Even if they were to brawl with some of your thugs, most likely they’d get away in the confusion. I’ll warn you—”

He looked at one of the assassins, who was already creeping into his blind spot.

“—I’m not as sweet as Krylancelo, because I’m not used to fighting in a way that spares lives.”

“That’s still eight versus two, Assistant Professor Forte Puckingham,” Wall warned, as if warning them out of tragic grief.

“Which makes me what? Chopped liver?”

A whisper swelled again once more in the room, all eyes converging on one point in their fields of vision— “A-Azalie?!” Orphen howled in disbelief, seeing a

small figure sitting cross-legged by the window behind Wall.

She wasn't armed like Forte, but she was there, dressed in simple combat robes with a slanted smile on her face.

There was no moment where her eyes weren't on the older man. The windows weren't even open, so she must've been transferred in by means of mana— "Azalie! Why?!"

"Because you were in danger fighting them all by yourself, you stupid boy," she laughed, and he shouted indignantly at her.

"That's not it! I'm fine! See, I've even got Forte here—!"

Here he looked to the doorway to see Forte, who was very calm considering he was facing an entire cabal of mutinous assassins finally showing their true colors.

After a beat, Orphen muttered, "So you knew Azalie was alive, Forte?"

"As of two weeks ago," he murmured in a confession. "During Krylancelo's big tantrum, my network was only able to see the assassin's face, but I still determined that it was Krylancelo there. Because Azalie was with him."

"I thought I was hiding properly, thank you very much," she said, sticking out her tongue.

Forte continued to speak, rubbing his hairline with his fingers.

"Now that I know you're alive, there are many ways I can contact you, you know."

"Wall Kahlen. Most likely you only expected Krylancelo's attack, didn't you?" she said, looking at the old assassin with dangerous eyes. "We'd thought we'd poke a few holes in that argument. You're a reluctant enemy of Childman's students, turning your students into pawns, and yet you only saw Krylancelo. It's telling, really."

"The Chaos... Witch... Are you sure you didn't confuse Milan for Swain or vice-versa?" The old man muttered in a rage. One could see the deep wrinkles in his skin. He continued to shake with his anger. "And you, Assistant Professor Forte Puckingham and the Successor of the Razor's Edge. I suppose I got careless. My

class and its legacy will end with this—”

Wall clenched his fist tight. And in that moment, all hesitation disappeared from his face.

“I can’t stand the thought of that!” He shouted, and as he did so, it was easy to see how tired he was as he charged over to the other three.

While he was old, he was still strong. Now that Childman had died, he, Wall Kahlen, was the strongest assassin in the Tower of Fangs. Hearing his agonized scream ring in his ears, Orphen quietly accepted it. He saw the old assassin’s quick assault from straight ahead...

But what he was thinking seemed out of place.

The Successor of the Razor’s Edge, the Steely Successor...

It was one moment. If one could stop time with the power of one’s will, it was the same.

In less than a fraction of an instant, Orphen’s consciousness burst open without sound as he realized something.

I am the only weapon that I can use to compete with opponents stronger than me.

His whole body quickly felt chilled, and his field of vision darkened. But he knew his surroundings, and knew that Wall was still coming for him, his movements clearly visible.

My past abilities! That’s what this feeling is!

Perhaps because of all of the confusion, Wall’s attack almost seemed amateurish. Orphen struck only the tip of his fist, halfway between his ring and middle fingers. He broke Wall’s hand, batted it away, and repelled him by sliding towards him with the inside of his flipped arm.

Orphen screamed, launching his elbow to the key point under his arm.

The only technique I inherited from Childman!

One moment later, Wall’s body was blown away.



The old assassin collapsed in agony after that vital point was hit. Looking forward, Orphen approached to follow him as he went down to the ground.

Wall wasn't sane by this point. He couldn't be. Pain and dyspnea reigned as his body folded in on itself as it struggled to breathe. His lungs shrank and suddenly more defenseless vital points were exposed.

Only one more blow would do it. All he had to do was drop his fist and that would be the end.

Orphen glanced down at him. No one could stop him—

He was the only one who could decide here.

He was the one who held the old man's life in his hands, his fortune, his existence.

“...”

Orphen slowly opened his fist, carefully considering his next action, and felt as if he were being watched by the others.

It would cost so little to kill him, and even less to become an assassin.

His breathing settled...

For a moment, he felt a gentle touch to his arm and turned around. There Azalie stood, grinning.

“Move, Krylancelo. You can't do anything further, can you? Allow me to take his and his students' memories of me.”

Looking to the other part of the classroom, Orphen saw the other assassins had been disarmed, in a stance of surrender with their hands behind their heads.

“I know you'll be good boys and not resist me, right? Because I sure as hell don't mind making invalids out of every single one of you.”

She began to knit a long spell together, as if it were poetry.

Her voice was so beautiful—

Listening to her, he went to Forte's side. He was still in the doorway of the

room.

Orphen whispered to him, "You used me, didn't you."

It wasn't a question but rather a confirmation of what he suspected and felt.

"That's correct," Forte said with a nod, not bothering to deny it. "I'm grateful. I've been trying to get rid of this class and these students for a while now."

"Do you really plan on taking control of the Tower? Like Childman did?"

At Orphen's prompting, Forte smiled dryly. He groaned, shaking ever so slightly.

"And to think he's gone now."

There was no other response than that. The air between them gained weight, as if lined with the tortures of hell itself.

A voice rose between them.

"I can't say I'm grateful."

That had been Azalie's voice. As all of the assassins walked out of the classroom as they were hypnotized one by one, she came up to them, holding a single book.

She played with the cover of the book.

"Were you planning on outwitting me? Where'd you put the real book?"

"I wonder," Orphen replied in a whisper, holding his pained head in his hands.

"Well, whatever," she sighed, and pushed the book into his arms.

"I'll give it back to the kid. You didn't actually look inside of it, did you?"

"Of course I did," she replied with satisfaction, or perhaps, because it was more important than the real world books and where they were hidden.

She smiled, and spoke to them.

"Thanks, you two."

"Of course," Forte replied smoothly as Orphen stared at her silently.

It seemed like Azalie didn't mind (or perhaps she'd expected that reaction)

but instead she looked back at them kindly and said, “If you really want to settle your scores with me, you’ll come with me to Kimluck.”

“To the head of the church, Sohonzan.”

Orphen repeated the name of the city where the head of the Church resided, one that he’d heard many times. A white light flashed in his field of vision violently without warning.

Azalie withdrew the little black box she used for information transfers, and traced the rune on its top with her finger.

With a soft series of pulses, the rune turned white, phosphorescent, and disappeared...

“I’ll return this favor one day, Krylancelo.”

Orphen couldn’t tell if that’s what she’d used to get into the Tower tonight, or if that had been something else, or if that’s where she’d hidden the World Book.

Just as he was about to answer her, she was already on her way out.

“You’re welcome to. Because I’ll always lend to you.”



With a meaningless sort of innocence, early-rising birds were already up in the sky, shrill chirps spilling from their beaks. Innocent in the morning. No one could think them anything else.

Dortin leaned on tiles that were moist with morning dew, and he grunted.

“Sounds like the roosters are up.”

Underneath his feet lay a thin strip of rope that managed to keep them both tied to the pillar all night.

“No, that’s not right, Dortin!”

Of course it was Volkan who shouted, brandishing his fist as best he could, crying with the voice of a man. “This is the warrior’s fate! Now that we have been released from bondage, all we have to do next is start a new kind of revolution! One that’s a few steps ahead of everyone else!”

“I mean, it was kind of a fatal mistake we didn’t notice the knot that was in my hand...” Dortin groaned, eyes heavily lidded as he readjusted his glasses.

He looked into the manor — no one seemed to be awake yet, but he knew he had to do it.

Let’s ask anyway, he thought to himself.

“What are we gonna do now, big brother?”

“Ahem!” Volkan nodded hard. “Although we failed in our initial run, the seeds of our revolution have already taken root in this land. We should travel to a new one to find people who need us!”

“So we’re running, huh? Roger that, message received.”

“We’re nooot running!” Volkan screamed, and then beat his brother with his sword.

Some time later, Dortin rolled into the hallway with a familiar look. Volkan continued to chase him, sword raised high in the air.

“Until the evil sorcerer’s corpse has been sketched in twelve different colors! That’s when our journey will end!”

He pointed to where the sun was beginning to rise.

“We must go north!”

“Uh, in the morning the sun rises in the east.”

“Don’t speak of such foolish things! No one cares about that!”

Dortin was beaten down again, but this time he got up quicker. While Volkan sighed, Dortin went to go pack, though neither of them had too much in the way of baggage.

“Let us hurry. If we don’t, the black sorcerer will return.”

After a beat, “You know what? I haven’t beaten you lately,” Volkan said, “Maybe it’s your turn to get beaten, little brother,” he muttered, sounding lonely somehow.

Suddenly, Dortin realized something and looked up.

“Hey, big brother, I just realized something. That black sorcerer gave you something while he was on his way out last night, right?”

“Yeah,” Volkan nodded, as he withdrew something from his pocket.

It was a black book with no title on it. It was just a book. Volkan pressed it against his heart as he spoke.

“I don’t know what motivated him to do so, but I think if we sell this book, we’re going to get a great deal for it! Wow!”

“I wonder if we can return some of our loan with some of the money from the sale of that book?”

“Hm, mayhaps.”

Dortin listened to his brother mutter his response, then asked him, “...Did you plan on returning any of that loan at all?”

Volkan looked as if he’d had the wind punched out of him, completely surprised.

“Why?”

“...Well,” Dortin said, “Whatever. It’s all good to me.”

And with the bright morning glow lighting the horizon, they stole out of the city.

Epilogue

“Why did you want to enter the Tower for your studies?”

Forte Puckingham’s smooth voice sounded cool as his words cut through the fog in his head.

It was said that Forte’s office— using a desk in a lecture room— had once belonged to a man named Childman.

It was a bit dim, but it was still only morning, so it would probably brighten up with the afternoon light.

What caught Majic’s attention were the ten well-ordered lockers there in the room. Every locker still had a name tag on it.

On the far right, in familiar handwriting, read one name tag.

Krylancelo

Below that with another set of handwriting there was another word, though it had faded long ago.

Majic came back to the moment. The man who was at the desk opposite of him coughed politely and prompted him with a quiet glance.

“Oh, um, well—”

Because he had been quite lost in life, he wanted to say.

Instead he said,

“I do not wish to be a burden. To my Master...”

Upon hearing that, Forte seemed to sigh a little deeper, a short exhalation of breath.

With a gentle rattle, Majic saw that Forte had moved himself a bit. The chair legs made a loud groan as they moved across the floor. As he stood watching, Majic recalled a vague and uncomfortable feeling.

The insanity of the night before was almost entirely unquestioned by Majic at this point, thanks in part to the arrangements Forte had made in advance.

Regarding senior sorcerer Leticia MacCready's assault and several other alleged murders, Wall would wait for execution at a later date.

Majic had no clue what his final punishment would be, and honestly, he was pretty sure he didn't want to know about it. He had no interest in it whatsoever.

But—

"Krylancelo has been determined to be the ringleader of the fight last night," Forte murmured suddenly, and Majic shrugged. Forte changed the topic with a calm face, as if reading him in advance.

"The Tower will be adopting the resolution to participate in treason against the Alliance."

"Alliance... treason?"

"It is the same as being ordered to die."

"..." All of the color drained out of Majic's face, while he waited for Forte's next words.

But Forte merely shrugged his shoulders and continued to speak.

"There's no reason to allow them to kill Krylancelo, is all. He's a harmless racketeer."

"But..." Majic shouted, feeling his body betray him as he started to tremble. "I guess he always has been."

"Perhaps to you, yes, that's all he's been," Forte said straightforwardly, standing up. He turned his back and faced the window, looking outside. He continued, doused in morning sunlight, "Krylancelo was your age when he fled the Tower, you know."

"..." Majic tried to say something, anything, but ended up swallowing his words instead.

"We tried to stop him, Leticia and I. But he just wasn't able to listen. He was a great sorcerer at that age already. He was my favorite junior classman. But he was so young, still, at that time."

He glanced over his shoulder at Majic. “I wonder if he knows how much damage he’s caused to his surroundings over the years. Well, he did show me once, so perhaps he does. I wonder if he’ll forgive me for that remark.”

Then he looked back out the window.

“By the way, there is a box on my desk.”

“...? Yes?” Majic asked, confused. It was just an ordinary paper box. Probably with shoes or something inside of it.

“Please open it.”

Majic did as Forte asked.

He gasped.

Forte shrugged.

“This...” He said with a soft groan, but not finishing his sentence.

In the box lay a silver pendant.

Upon its crest was a one-legged dragon, clinging to a sword.

It was brand new, not a bit of rust or dirt clinging to it. The chain was robust and strong.

However, there were two of them inside of the box.

“The dragon is said to mean something more powerful than our continental dragon race. In legend, it speaks of a one true dragon—”

Forte then lowered his voice dramatically to a whisper.

“One of these belongs to Krylancelo. The elders confiscated it but I picked it out of the trash chute. The first thing I did this morning was to go dumpster diving for him. Consider this my way of repaying him. I’m grateful.”

“What about the other one?”

“If you give it back to Krylancelo, you’ll know.”

“...?”

While wondering, Majic gently turned the crests over. He knew that the owner’s name tended to be inscribed on the back of every one of them.

On one, Krylancelo's initials were clearly engraved.

And on the other...

Azalie? He wondered.

"Please give both of them to him, if you would," Forte requested quietly. Before Majic could agree to do so, Forte continued to speak.

"Contrary to the elder's rules, I will return this crest of arms to a permanently expelled student, which is a felony according to the laws of the Tower. It's safer than allowing him to come back here."

"...Huh?" Majic asked, when he couldn't understand it, with a stuttering voice.

He held both crests and faced Forte—

"Why did you decide to enter the Tower?" Forte asked once more.

"..."

This time, he just couldn't respond.

As he stayed silent, Forte managed to chortle without actually laughing.

"You'll have to forgive me. I felt that your reply from before was a bit boring so I thought I'd ask you again."

"...But..."

Ignoring Majic's reply, he continued, "It's a lonely, lonely thing to realize that someone that was with you once before will be gone one day. He didn't say he didn't want to be with you, right? That's the sort of thing he knows you have to decide for yourself."

Then he sat down, and lowered his voice. "The reason he left the Tower is... well, I don't want to violate his privacy, so just ask him. Leticia told me that their departure would be delayed until the afternoon. If you leave now, you might make it in time before they go."

"..." Majic, holding both pendants, waited for him to continue to speak. But Forte leaned against his elbows on his desk, hinting that he was done with speaking for now.

The younger man slowly opened his mouth, rubbing under his eyes with the back of a finger.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!” he shouted, and ran out of the room.

Forte was alone in the room after Majic’s exit.

He muttered to himself.

“Azalie, the Chaos Witch. Or perhaps I should call her by her true name, the Golden Trump Card. Perhaps this time she won’t have a role to play. What will you do, dear Krylancelo? Those Kimluck bastards aren’t easy foes to conquer, after all.”

Afterword

“Dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun! Have you noticed yet? We’re already at the end of our book this time around, so it’s time for ya girl Pat, aka Patricia, to make the author’s life a living hell! I’m going to break this jinx, and aim for the heroine’s seat this time! Directly continuing from the end of the last volume—”

“Enjoy it while you can, because I’m putting you where you belong, after this.”

“...?”

“Gonna chuck you out with the trash, kid.”

“Sob... sob...”

“Please ignore this little gremlin. It’s me, your humble author. We’re finally to the end of the sixth book! Things really piled up in this volume and got a bit crazy, eh?”

“(Affirming) That’s right! Lying is not a crime!”

“Well, I suppose even criminals have the right to be proud of themselves every once in awhile.”

“(Ignoring her) Anyway, even though we’re six books deep into this series, I finally got to work on what I’ve been calling the Tower of Fangs Arc, and expanding on that part of the world this time. Book five and six are a part of that storyline. I just couldn’t shrink it enough to stick it in one book, mostly because I had too many characters. So I split it into two books.”

“Compared to the last book, this book had a lot more foreshadowing in it, right?”

“That’s right. I usually try to complete each one as they come along, but for some parts of this book there were just too many hints I couldn’t leave unexplored.”

“It’s good to do that sometimes.”

“It’s normal to ask a little of one’s readership, right? But this time, even I asked myself, isn’t this a little much?”

“Pat’s words have Pat’s love in them, you know.”

“Love...?”

“How can I explain it? Anyway, we’re at the end of the Tower of Fangs Arc at the moment. So what’s next?”

“It’s more like Akita is doing whatever he wants at this point, going according to his feelings. How irresponsible of him! Truthfully, I was thinking about doing two more episodes about the Kimluck Church’s headquarters.”

“You mean you’re not?”

“I’m thinking it’s time for a short side stories arc.”

“Like a bunch of short stories based in this universe?”

“Kind of. I’m not exactly jumping right into the Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: Reckless Arc just yet. Normally these short stories will be things that fall between these six volumes and a future volume about the Kimluck Headquarters. But because I’m still sketching that out at the moment, I’d thought I’d delve a little bit more into this world itself, giving you guys a bit of variety and a bit of a breather. We’ll be dropping in to a mysterious case involving a village next, and it’s related to the anime that’s currently in production at the moment! At least, that’s what I’ve just decided.”

“Man you really are on the ball when you’re writing, already thinking of what you’re gonna do next, right? But why are you sandwiching such a story between everything else?”

“Quite honestly, the more I work in this world, the more I think about it, and the more I want to do in it. I’m getting more serious about it personally, and giving it more consideration, I suppose.”

“Oh ho, so you really can say that you’re thinking about things with plans like those.”

“But it’s definitely not because of the fact that I still don’t have certain small details about the Kimluck arc nailed down yet or anything, hahaha.”

“I take it back...”

“No, no, really, it’s for the former reason. The Kimluck Church is also (this is all

a secret from here on out as it hasn't been formally decided yet. I'm not convinced fully yet but please believe me anyway when I tell you this). So compared to the other six volumes, volume seven is going to be a bit fluffier than the others."

"But at the end of things, the author is just going to dye his main character in blood, isn't he? Soak him in it. Keeps things interesting, after all."

"I firmly believe that standing in blood is the hero's condition."

"Keep talking, kid. You're just digging your own grave."

"And that's why lying is not a sin, lol. But I am sorry to say that injustice is a sin."

"Listen up. Do we have any fun fan letters to read?"

"You don't have any, gremlin. But I'm happy to say that fan letters to Akita have gradually increased so much that I can't keep up with them."

"But there's only one of you, right?"

"And that's exactly why I can't keep up. So I'm thinking of having a lottery, and whoever wins gets a reply. Please don't be angry if you don't get a reply. The long form series and the Reckless arc will be published every other month."

"So please try to forgive him, the poor guy is working his hands to the bone writing for you all. Is that what you're trying to tell your readers?"

"Uh, well, I'm gonna say goodbye while I start to make some excuses..."

"That's very on brand for you, sir. Anyway, we'll see you at the end of the next volume!"

"But only me, you know. Not you. (Heartlessly)"

Yoshinobu Akita, March 1996



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by Yoshinobu Akita

Translated by Andrew Hodgson

Edited by Christopher Foxx

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